MAX BLECHER

Adventures in Immediate Unreality

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"I pant, I sink, I tremble, I expire"
P.B. Shelley

When I stare at a fixed point on the wall for a long time, it sometimes happens that I no longer know who I am or where I am. Then I feel my absence of identity from a distance as if I had become, for a moment, a complete stranger. With equal force, this abstract character and my real self struggle to win my conviction.

In the next instant my identity finds itself again, as in those stereoscopic views where two images separate by mistake, and only when the operator lines them up, superposing them, do they suddenly give the illusion of relief. The room then seems to have a freshness that it didn't have before. It returns to its former consistency and the objects within it are deposited the way a clod of rubbly earth in a glass of water settles in layers of different elements, well-defined and variously colored. The elements of the room stratify into their proper contours with the coloring of old as I remember it.

The sensation of distance and isolation, in the moments when my everyday self has dissolved into insubstantiality, is different from any other sensation. When it lasts a while, it becomes a fear, a terror of never being able to find myself again. In the distance, an uncertain silhouette of me remains, surrounded by a great luminosity in the way some objects appear in a fog.

The terrible question "who am I?" lives in me then like an entirely new body, sprung up with skin and organs that are completely unknown to me. Its resolution is demanded by a more profound and more essential lucidity than that of the brain. Everything that's capable of being agitated in my body becomes agitated, struggles and revolts more powerfully and in a more elementary way than in everyday life. Everything implores a solution.

A few times, I find the room as I know it, as if I were closing and opening my eyes; each time the room is clearer—as a landscape appears in a telescope, better and better organized, as, regarding the distances, we go through all the intermediate veils of images.

At last I recognize myself and find the room again. There is a sensation

of light drunkenness. The room is extraordinarily condensed in its substance, and I am implacably returned to the surface of things: the deeper the trough of uncertainty, the higher its crest; at no other time and under no other circumstances does it seem more evident to me than at those moments that each object must occupy the place that it occupies and that I must be who I am. Nor does my struggle in this state of uncertainty have a name; it's a simple regret that I've found nothing in its depths. I am only surprised by the fact that a total lack of meaning could be bound so profoundly to my intimate substance. Now that I've found myself again and I look for a way to express the sensation, it appears completely impersonal to me: a simple exaggeration of my identity, self-generating like cancer from its own substance. A tentacle of a jellyfish that's extended itself too far and that's looked through the waves in exasperation until at last it has returned under the gelatinous bell. In this way, in the few moments of anxiety, I have gone through all the certainties and uncertainties of my existence to return definitively and painfully to my solitude.

At that moment my solitude is purer and more pathetic than at other times. The sensation of the world's retreat is clearer and more intimate: a limpid and delicate melancholy, like a dream that we remember in the middle of the night.

It alone recalls to me something of the mystery and sad charm of my childhood "spells."

Only in this sudden disappearance of identity do I regain my falls in the cursed spaces of old, and only in the moments of immediate lucidity that follow the return to surface, does the world appear in that unusual atmosphere of uselessness and desuetude that formed around me when my hallucinatory trances ceased wrestling with me.

It was always the same places in the streets, in the houses or in the parks that set off my spells. Each time I entered these spaces, the same swoon and the same vertigo overtook me. Veritable invisible snares placed here and there in town, not any different from the things that surrounded them—with ferocity they lay in wait for me to fall prey to the special atmosphere they exuded. Were I to take a step, a single step, and enter such a "cursed space," the spell became inevitable.

One of these spaces was in the town park in a small clearing at the end of a path that no one ever used. Bushes of sweet briar and dwarf acacia that surrounded it opened up on one side to the desolation of a deserted

field. There was no place on earth sadder or more abandoned. The silence lay thick on the dusty leaves in the stagnant heat of summer. From time to time the echoes of the trumpets from the regiments could be heard. Those drawn-out calls in the wasteland were heart-rendingly sad... In the distance, the air ignited by the sun quavered vaporously like the transparent steam that rises above a boiling liquid.

The place was wild and isolated; its loneliness seemed endless. There I felt the heat of the day was more tiring and the air I breathed heavier. The dusty bushes baked yellow in the sun, in an atmosphere of perfect solitude. A bizarre sensation of uselessness floated in the air in that clearing that existed "somewhere in the world," somewhere that I myself had happened upon without purpose, on some summer afternoon that was likewise without any meaning. An afternoon that had strayed chaotically in the heat of the sun, through some bushes anchored in space "somewhere in the world." I felt more profoundly and more painfully then that I had nothing to do in this world, nothing other than to tramp through parks—through dusty clearings burnt by the sun, deserted and wild. It was a vagabondage that broke my heart in the end.

Another cursed place was situated just at the other end of town, between the high and pitted banks of the river where I used to bathe with the other kids.

In one place the bank had caved in. Above the shore a factory had been set up for extracting oil from sunflower seeds. The shells of the seeds were thrown into the pit of the riverbank where it had caved in, and with time the heap had risen so high that a slope of dried shells had formed above the shore to the edge of the water.

The others would go down to the water on this slope, cautious, holding hands, stepping deeply into the carpet of decay. The walls of the pit on either side of the heap of dried shells were steep and full of fantastic irregularities. Rain had sculpted long streaks of fine cracks like arabesques but hideous like badly healed wounds. They were veritable rags in the flesh of the earth, horrible gaping wounds.

I too had to go down to the river between these walls that affected me beyond measure. Even from far off and much before arriving at the riverbank, my nostrils were filled with the smell of the putrefying hulls. It prepared me for the "spell" like a short period of incubation; it was an unpleasant smell though mild. Much like the spells.

My olfactive sense separated in two somewhere inside of me, and the two effluvia of the odor of putrefaction reached different regions of sensation. The gelatinous smell of decomposing hulls was separate and very distinct, though concomitant, from the pleasing, warm, domestic aroma of roasted hazelnuts.

As soon as I smelled it, this aroma transformed me in a few instants, circulating fully throughout all my internal fibers dissolving them and replacing them with a more airy and uncertain material. From that moment on I could avoid nothing. A pleasing and intoxicating swoon began in my chest, which propelled my feet toward the shore, toward the place of my definitive defeat.

I would descend to the water at a crazy speed on the mound of hulls. The air opposed me with a sharp and hard density like a knife blade. The contents of the world hurtled chaotically into an immense hole through mysterious powers of attraction. The other kids watched my insane flight with horror. The gravel strip down below was very narrow and the smallest misstep would have hurled me into the river, into a place where the whirlpools on the surface of the water showed its great depth.

I wasn't really aware of what I was doing. Once I arrived at the water, I went around the mound of hulls with the same speed and ran along the bank down the river to a certain place where there was a hollow.

At the bottom of the hollow a small grotto had formed, a cavern shaded and cool like a small room dug out of rock. I entered and fell to the ground, sweating, exhausted and trembling from head to toe.

When I revived a little, I found near me the intimate and indescribably pleasing decor of a grotto with a spring that spouted slowly from the rock and that trickled along the ground, forming a basin of limpid water in the middle of the gravel, above which I bowed to see, without ever tiring of it, the wondrous lace of the green moss at the bottom, worms hanging from bits of wood, pieces of old rusty iron with silt on them, animals and a whole variety of things at the bottom of the fantastically beautiful water.

Outside of these two cursed places, the rest of the town dissolved into a uniform mass of banality, with interchangeable houses, with trees that were exasperatingly immobile, with dogs, vacant lots and dust. The spells occurred more readily and more often in enclosed spaces. Usually I could not bear being alone in an unfamiliar room. If I had to wait there, the swoon would overcome me within a few moments, suave and terrible. The room itself prepared for it: a warm and hospitable intimacy would filter through the walls, trickling over all the furniture and over all the objects.

All of a sudden the room would become sublime and I would feel very happy in its space. But this was no more than a trick of the spell, its fine and delicate perversity. In the next moment of my beatitude, all was overturned and confounded. I would stare wide-eyed at everything around me, but the objects had lost their usual significance: they were bathed in a new existence.

As if they had suddenly been unwrapped from the thin and transparent paper in which they had been enveloped until then, their aspect became ineffably new. They appeared destined for new, superior and fantastic uses that I would have strived to discover in vain.

But not only that: the objects were thrown into a veritable frenzy of freedom. They became independent of one another, but it was an independence that meant not only their simple isolation but also an ecstatic exaltation. The enthusiasm to exist in a new aura overcame me also: powerful attachments connected me to the objects, through invisible anostomoses that turned me into an object in the room like the others, in the same way in which an organ grafted onto live flesh, through subtle exchanges of substances, integrates itself into the foreign body. Once, during one of my spells, the sun had cast a small cascade of rays on the walls, like irreal gold water, marbled with luminous waves. I saw the corner of a bookcase with thick volumes bound in leather behind glass, and these real details that I perceived from the distance of my swoon ended by intoxicating me and knocking me out like the last inhalation of chloroform. What was most common and familiar in those objects disturbed me most. The habit of scrutinizing them so many times had probably ended by wearing away the exterior skin, and so sometimes they appeared to me flayed to the point of bleeding: alive, indescribably alive.

The supreme moment of the spell was consumed floating outside of any world in a way that was at once pleasant and painful. At the sound of footsteps, the room quickly returned to its old aspect. Then there would commence a decline within the four walls, an extremely slight, almost imperceptible diminution of its exaltation; this convinced me that the certainty in which I lived was separated from the world of uncertainties by the thinnest of membranes. I would find myself in the room that I knew so well, sweating, exhausted and full of the sensation of the uselessness of the things around me. I would observe new particularities in them, as happens when we discover some fresh detail in an object that we have used every day for years.

The room vaguely retained the memory of the catastrophe like the sulfurous smell of a place where an explosion had occurred. I saw the bound

books in the glass cabinets and in their immobility I noticed, for some reason, a perfidious air of concealment and complicity. The objects around me never gave up their secretive attitude, ferociously maintained in their severe immobility.

Ordinary words are not valid at certain spiritual depths. I'm trying to define my spells exactly but only find images. The magic word that could express them would have to borrow something from the essence of other sensibilities in life, distilling itself from them like a new scent from a masterly concoction of perfumes.

For the word to exist, it should contain something of the stupefaction that grips me when I see a person in reality and then follow their gestures in a mirror, plus something of the disequilibrium of falling in dreams with the whistling fear that runs down the spine in an unforgettable instant; or something of the fog and transparency inhabited by bizarre scenes in crystal balls.

I envied the people around me, hermetically sealed in their clothes and isolated from the tyranny of objects. They lived as prisoners under jackets and overcoats but nothing from the outside could terrorize and defeat them, nothing penetrated their wonderful prisons. Between the world and me there was no separation. Everything that surrounded me invaded me from head to toe as if my skin had been a sieve. My attentiveness—distracted at that—to the things that surrounded me, was not a simple act of will. The world naturally stretched all its tentacles toward me; I was crisscrossed by the thousand arms of the hydra. In exasperation I was forced to observe that I was living in the world that I saw. There was nothing more to be done about it.

The spells belonged to me and to the places where they occurred in the same measure. It's true that some of these places contained a malevolence of their own, but all the others were found in a trance themselves much before my coming. So it was for instance with some rooms, where I felt my spells crystallizing from the melancholy of immobility and boundless solitude found there.

As a kind of equity, however, between me and the world (an equity which immersed me still more irremediably in the uniformity of raw matter) the conviction that objects could be innocuous became equal with the terror that they sometimes inspired in me. Their innocuousness came from a universal lack of force.

I sensed vaguely that nothing in this world could reach the end, nothing could complete itself. The ferocity of objects also became exhausted. Thus the idea was born in me of the imperfection of any manifestation in this world, even the supernatural ones.

In a never-ending interior dialogue I would sometimes defy the maleficent powers around me, and at other times fawn upon them basely. I practiced some weird rituals, though they were not without meaning. If I left the house and went on different roads, I would always retrace my steps coming back home; I did this so as not to describe a circle with my path in which houses and trees would remain enclosed. In this regard my walk resembled a thread and if, once unwound, it had not been rewound, along the same road, the objects collected in the knots of the walk would have forever remained irremediably and profoundly bound to me. If I avoided touching the stones in the path of the water when it rained, I did this so as not to add anything to the action of water and not to intervene in the exercise of its elemental powers.

Fire purified all. I always had a box of matches in my pocket. Whenever I was very sad I would light a match and pass my hand through the flame, first one, then the other.

There was in all this a kind of melancholy of existing and a kind of organized torment that was normal within the limits of my life as a child.

In time the spells disappeared on their own, though not without leaving behind their powerful memory, forever. When I entered adolescence I no longer had these spells, but in a way, that crepuscular state that preceded them and the profound feeling of the uselessness of the world that followed became my natural state.

The uselessness filled the hollows of the world like a liquid that had spread out in all directions, and the sky above me, the eternally correct sky, absurd and indefinite, took on the characteristic color of despair.

To this day I go about in this uselessness that surrounds me and under this eternally cursed sky.

A physician was consulted about my spells and he pronounced a strange word: "paludism;" I was amazed that something so intimate and secret as my disquietude could have a name, and what's more, a name so bizarre. The doctor had prescribed quinine: another cause for amazement. I found it impossible to understand how the sick spaces, *themselves*, could have been cured with the quinine that *I* took. What disturbed me exceedingly, however, was the physician himself. Long after the consultation he continued to exist and to stir in my memory with little automatic gestures whose inexhaustible mechanism I couldn't shut off.

He was a man of small stature with an egg-shaped head. The pointed end of the egg was elongated by a little black beard that was forever agitated. His small and velvety eyes, curt gestures and protruding mouth made him resemble a mouse. This impression was so powerful from the first moment that it seemed completely natural when I heard him prolonging each "r" sonorously when he began to speak, as if he were continuously munching on something hidden.

The quinine that he gave me also strengthened the conviction that the physician had something mouse-like about him. The verification of this conviction was made in such a strange way and is related to such important facts of my childhood that a part of the events is worth the telling.

Near our house there was a sewing machine store where I would go every day for hours. Its owner was a young man, Eugen, who had just finished his military service and had found himself a place in town by opening the shop. He had a sister who was a year younger than him: Clara. They lived together in some workingclass neighborhood and looked after the shop during the day; they had neither acquaintances nor relatives.

The shop was a simple private room rented commercially for the first time.

The walls still kept their parlor paint with violet garlands of lilac, and

there were discolored rectangular patches where the pictures had hung. In the middle of the ceiling a bronze lamp had been left, with a dark red majolica cap, covered at the edges with green acanthus leaves set off in faience. It was an object full of ornamentation, old and obsolete, yet imposing—something that resembled a funeral monument or a veteran general on parade wearing his old uniform.

The sewing machines were lined up smartly in three rows leaving two wide aisles to the back. Eugen took care to sprinkle the floor every morning using an old can with a hole at the bottom. The spray of water that flowed out was very thin and Eugen maneuvered it dexterously sketching spirals and masterly figure eights on the floor. Sometimes he signed his name and wrote the date. The wall painting called for such delicacy.

At the back of the store a screen made of boards separated a kind of cabin from the rest of the shop; a green curtain covered the entrance. Eugen and Clara stayed there all the time; they even ate lunch there so they wouldn't have to leave the shop. They named it "the actors' dressing room" and I heard Eugen saying one day: "It's a true 'actors' dressing room.' When I go into the shop and talk for half an hour trying to sell a sewing machine, am I not acting in a comedy?"

And then he added in a more learned voice: "Life, in general, is pure theater."

Behind the curtain Eugen played the violin. He kept the music on the table and sat bent over them, patiently deciphering the tangled staves as if he were disentangling a ball of string with numerous knots in it in order to pull forth a unique and delicate thread, the thread of music. All afternoon a small gas lamp burned on a chest filling the room with a morose light and distorting an enormous shadow of the violinist on the walls.

I came so often that in time I became a kind of furniture-guest, an extension of the old cerecloth couch on which I sat immobile, a thing that no one bothered about and that bothered no one.

At the back of the "dressing room" Clara would perform her afternoon toilette. She kept her dresses in a cabinet and looked at herself in a cracked mirror that was propped against a lamp on the chest. It was such an old mirror that the gilding had faded completely in places, and the real objects behind the mirror appeared through the transparent patches, commingling with the reflected image, like a photograph with superimposed negatives.

Sometimes she undressed almost completely and rubbed some eau de Cologne under her arms, raising them without embarrassment, or on the

bosom—putting a hand inside her chemise. The chemise was short and when she leaned over I could see all of her beautiful legs encased in tight stockings. On the whole she resembled a half-naked woman that I had seen once on a pornographic postcard that a pretzel seller had shown me in the park.

It provoked the same indistinct swoon as had the obscene picture, a kind of void that formed in my chest, while at the same time a terrible sexual craving squeezed my pubis like a claw.

I always stayed in the same place in the "dressing room," on the couch behind Eugen and waited for Clara to finish her toilette. Then she would go out into the store, passing between her brother and me through a space so narrow that she had to rub her thighs against my knees.

I waited for this moment every day with the same impatience and the same agony. It depended on a mass of trivial circumstances which I weighed and watched for with an exasperating and extraordinarily acute sensibility. It was enough for Eugen to be thirsty, not to feel like playing or for a customer to come into the shop for him to leave his place by the table, which would mean that there would be enough space for Clara to pass without brushing against me.

When I went there in the afternoon and neared the door to the store, long vibrating antennae came out of me and explored the air to catch the sound of the violin; if I heard Eugen playing, a great calm would come over me. I went in as quietly as possible and at the doorway I would even announce myself so he wouldn't think a customer had come and interrupt his playing for a second: it was possible that in that second, the inertia and the mirage of the melody would stop abruptly and that Eugen would abandon the violin and not play at all the rest of the afternoon. That wasn't the end of the possibility of unfavorable events. There were still so many things that passed in the dressing room... While Clara performed her toilette, I listened for the smallest sounds and followed the smallest movements for fear that somehow from those would issue the disaster of the afternoon. It was possible, for instance, for Eugen to cough lightly, to swallow a little saliva and to say suddenly that he was thirsty and that he was going to the cafe to get a pastry; from the infinitely trivial cause as this cough, a lost afternoon resulted, monstrous and enormous. The whole day would lose its importance and at night in bed, instead of ruminating at leisure (and stopping a few minutes on each detail in order to "see" and remember better) about the moment when my knees touched Clara's stockings—to dig out, to carve and to caress this thought—I would toss and turn feverishly under the sheets,

unable to sleep, waiting impatiently for the next day.

One day something completely unexpected happened. It began with the appearance of an impending disaster and finished with an unhoped for surprise, but so suddenly and with so trivial a gesture that all my later happiness rested on it like a scaffolding of heteroclite objects held in balance by a juggler at a single point.

Clara, with a single step, changed the whole content of my visits, giving them another interest and new anxieties, as in that chemical experiment in which we see how a single bit of crystal immersed in a bowl of red liquid transforms it instantaneously into an amazing green.

I was on the sofa, in the same place, waiting with the same impatience as always, when the door opened and someone came into the shop. Eugen left the dressing room immediately. Everything seemed lost. Clara continued to perform her toilette, indifferent, while the conversation in the shop went on endlessly. Still, Eugen could have come back before his sister finished dressing.

Painfully I followed the thread of these two events, Clara's toilette and the conversation in the shop, thinking that they could unfold in parallel mode until Clara went out into the shop, or on the contrary they could meet at a fixed point in the dressing room, as in some cinematographic films where two trains come toward each other at a crazy speed and they will either meet or go around depending on whether or not a mysterious hand intervenes at the last moment to shunt them. In those moments of waiting I felt clearly how the conversation followed its own path while on a parallel track, Clara continued to powder herself...

I tried to correct fate by stretching my knees further toward the table. In order to encounter Clara's legs I had to sit on the edge of the couch in a position that was, if not bizarre, at least comical.

I think Clara was looking at me through the mirror and smiling.

Soon she finished rounding off the contours of her mouth with carmine and passed the powder puff over her face for the last time. The perfume that had spread throughout the dressing room made me dizzy with lust and despair. In the moment that she passed by me the thing that I was least expecting happened: she rubbed her thighs against my knees like always (or maybe more firmly? but this was, of course, an illusion) with an indifferent air as if nothing were going on between us. There is a complicity in vice deeper and quicker than any understanding through words. Instantaneously it traverses the whole body like an interior melody and completely transforms

thoughts, flesh, blood.

In the split second when Clara's legs touched me, immense new expectations and hopes were born.

With Clara I understood everything from the first day, from the first moment; it was my first complete and normal sexual affair. An affair full of torments and waiting, full of anxieties and gnashing of teeth, something that would have resembled love if it had not been a simple continuation of a painful eagerness. In the same measure that I was impulsive and bold, Clara was calm and capricious; she had a violent way of provoking me and experienced a kind of malicious joy at seeing me suffer—joy that always preceded and that was a part of the sexual act itself.

The first time it happened between us, the thing I had been awaiting for so long, its provocation was of such elementary simplicity (almost brutal) that the inadequate phrase that she used then and that anonymous verb that she employed has kept for me, to this day, something of its former virulence. It's enough for me to think about it for my present indifference to corrode as by acid and the phrase to recapture the violence it had then.

Eugen had gone into town. We were alone in the shop, silent; Clara sat with her legs crossed in her afternoon dress behind the shop window and knitted with great concentration. Some weeks had passed since the incident in the dressing room and a severe coldness had arisen abruptly between us, a secret tension that translated itself into an extreme indifference on her part. We sat for whole hours in front of one another without uttering a word; nevertheless, a perfect and secret understanding floated in this silence like the threat of an explosion. I only lacked the mysterious word that would crack the shell of convention. I made dozens of plans every evening, but the next day they came up against the most elementary obstacles: the knitting that could not be interrupted, the lack of better lighting, the silence in the shop or the three rows of sewing machines, too well-ordered to permit any important changes in the store, even if they were only on the order of feelings. I had my jaws clenched all the time; it was a terrible silence, a silence that, in me, had the shape and substance of a scream. It was Clara who broke the silence. She spoke almost in a whisper, without raising her eyes from the knitting:

"If you had come earlier today, we could have *done it*. Eugen went into town right after lunch."

Until then no shadow of a sexual allusion had filtered through our silence, and now here with a few words, a new reality sprang up between us, as miraculous and extraordinary as a marble statue rising up amidst the sewing machines, growing out of the floor.

In an instant I was at Clara's side, I seized her hand and caressed it violently. I kissed her hand. She snatched it away.

"Leave me alone," she said, annoyed.

"Please Clara, come..."

"It's too late now, Eugen is coming back, leave me alone, leave me alone."

I fondled her shoulders, her breasts, her legs, feverishly.

"Leave me alone," Clara protested.

"Come now, we still have time," I implored.

"Where?"

"In the dressing room... come on... it'll be good there."

And when I said "good" my chest filled with warm hope. I kissed her hand again and pulled her forcefully from the chair. She allowed herself to be led reluctantly, dragging her feet on the floor.

Starting from that day the afternoons changed their "habits": It was still about Eugen, still about Clara and the same sonatas; however, now the playing of the violin became intolerable and I lay in wait impatiently for the moment when Eugen had to leave. In the same dressing room my anxieties became something else as if I were playing a new game but using a board with lines drawn for the old game I knew.

When Eugen left, the real waiting began. It was a waiting that was more difficult and intolerable than what I had experienced up to that moment; the silence of the shop transformed itself into a block of ice.

Clara sat at the window and knitted; every day this was the "beginning," and without it our affair could not take place. Sometimes Eugen went out and left Clara practically undressed in the dressing room; I thought that this would hasten the events but I was mistaken; Clara would not permit another beginning than the one from the shop. I had to wait uselessly for her to get dressed and go out into the shop to open the book of the afternoon to the first page while sitting behind the shop window.

I would sit on a chair in front of her and begin to talk to her, to plead with her, to implore her at length. I knew it was useless; Clara only rarely agreed and even then she resorted to guile in order to deny me perfect license:

"I'm going to take some powder in the dressing room, I have a terrible headache; please don't follow me."

I promised on oath and followed her immediately. A veritable battle began in the dressing room in which, evidently, Clara's forces were disposed to surrender. She then fell on the couch as if she had stumbled on something. She put her hands under her head and closed her eyes as if she had gone to sleep. It was impossible for me to change the position of her body by a centimeter; as she was lying on her side, I had to pull up her dress from under her thighs and cling to her. Clara put up no opposition to my movements, but neither did she facilitate them. She was immobile and indifferent as a block of wood, and only her intimate and secret heat revealed to me that she was attentive and that she "knew."

It was about this time that the physician who prescribed the quinine was consulted. The verification of my impression that he had something mouse-like about him took place in the dressing room, and as I've said, in a completely absurd and surprising way.

One day, while I was glued to Clara and pulling up her dress feverishly, I felt something strange moving in the dressing room and divined—more with the obscure but highly acute instinct of extreme pleasure that I was nearing, which allowed for no foreign presence, than with my own true senses—that a living creature was watching us.

Startled, I turned my head and caught sight of a mouse on the chest, behind the box of face powder. It stopped right next to the mirror at the edge of the chest and stared at me with its small black eyes in which the light of the lamp put two glittering drops of gold that pierced me deeply. For a few seconds it looked into my eyes with such acuity that I felt those two glassy points penetrating me to the back of the brain. It appeared that it was meditating on a severe invective to level against me or perhaps only a reproach. All of a sudden, however, the fascination was shattered and the mouse broke into a run disappearing behind the chest. I was sure that the doctor had come to spy on me.

That same evening when I was taking the quinine, my supposition was strengthened through a perfectly illogical line of reasoning, though for me completely valid: the quinine was bitter; on the other hand, the doctor had seen in the dressing room the pleasure that Clara sometimes bestowed upon me; consequently, in order to establish the right equilibrium, he had prescribed the most disagreeable medicine in the world. I heard him crunching out the reasoning in my mind: "The grrreater the pleasurrre, the more bitterrr must be the drrrug!"

A few months after the consultation, the doctor was found dead in the attic of his house; he had put a bullet through his temple.

My first question when I heard the sinister news was:

"Were there mice in that attic?"

I had to ascertain this.

In order for the doctor to be truly dead, it was absolutely necessary for a horde of mice to overrun the corpse, to dig into it and extract the mousey substance borrowed by the physician during his life for the exercise of his illegal existence as "man."

When I first got to know Clara, I believe I was twelve years old. However far back in childhood I go to rummage through my memories, I find them tied to sexual knowledge, which appears to me just as nostalgic and pure as the adventure of night, of fear or of first friends. It was no different from other melancholies and other kinds of waiting; for instance, the boredom of waiting to become "big" that I appreciated in a concrete way each time I gave my hand to an older person, trying to mark the difference in weight and size of my small hands, lost between the gnarled fingers, in the enormous palm of the one who was shaking it.

At no moment in childhood was I unaware of the difference between men and women. Maybe there was a time when all living beings were mixed up for me in a unique limpidity of motion and inertia; I have no exact memory about this. The sexual secret was always apparent. It had to do with a "secret" the way it would have had to do with an object: a table or a chair.

When I examine closely my most remote memories though, "their lack of reality" is revealed to me by the mistaken understanding of the sexual act. I imagined the female organs in erroneous forms and the act itself as much more splendid and strange than what I knew with Clara. In all the interpretations—mistaken, and then more and more accurate—an air of mystery and bitterness floated ineffably above, which slowly took shape like a painting begun from formless sketches.

I see myself, very small, in a shirt that goes down to my heels, crying despairingly in the doorway, in a yard full of sun, whose gate is opened toward a deserted square, a square at noon, warm and sad, with dogs asleep on their bellies and men lying in the shade of vegetable stands.

In the air the pungent odor of rotten vegetables; some large purple flies buzz noisily near me sipping the tears fallen on my hands and flying in frenetic circles in the dense and blazing light of the yard. I rise and urinate carefully in the dust. The ground sucks up the liquid avidly and in its place a dark

paste remains like the shadow of an object that doesn't exist. I wipe my face with my shirt and lick the tears from the corner of my mouth savouring their salty taste. I sit down on the threshold again and feel miserable. I have been spanked.

My father has just spanked me a few times on the bare buttocks in my room. I don't really know why. I'm thinking about it. I was lying in bed next to a little girl my age, both of us put there to sleep while our parents were out walking. I wasn't aware of them returning and I don't know exactly what I was doing to the little girl under the blanket. I only know that, when my father suddenly lifted the blanket, the little girl had begun to go along. My father turned red, became angry and spanked me. That's all.

Now I'm sitting in the doorway in the sun; I've cried and wiped my eyes; I draw circles and lines in the dust with a finger; I move toward the shade, sit down Turkish-style on a rock and feel better. A girl has come into the yard to get water and turns the rusty wheel of the pump. I listen carefully to the squeaking of the old iron; I watch how the water gushes out into the bucket like the superb tail of a silver horse; I look at the girl's large and dirty feet; I yawn because I haven't slept at all and from time to time I try to catch a fly. It's the simple life that begins again after weeping. In the yard the sun continues to spill its blistering heat. It's my first sexual adventure and my oldest memory from childhood.

From this point forward obscure instincts swell, grow, become deformed and find their natural limits. What should have been an amplification and a continually growing fascination was for me a series of renunciations and cruel reductions to the banal; the evolution from childhood to adolescence meant a continual diminution of the world, and as things organized themselves around me, their ineffable aspect disappeared, like a shiny surface that mists over.

The ecstatic and miraculous figure of Walter keeps its fascinating light to this day.

When I met him, he was sitting on a tree trunk in the shade of an acacia, reading a fascicle of Buffalo Bill. The clear light of morning filtered through the dense green leaves in a rustling of cool shadows. His clothes were quite unusual: he wore a dark cherry tunic with buttons carved from bone, fawn-skin trousers, and on his bare feet sandals woven out of fine white leather thongs. When I sometimes want to relive for a moment the extraordinary sensation of this meeting, I contemplate at length an old yellowed cover of a fascicle of Buffalo Bill. Still, the real presence of Walter was something else entirely, his red tunic in the greenish atmosphere, in the shade of the acacia.

His first gesture was a kind of springing to his feet like that of an animal. We became friends immediately. We talked for a bit and suddenly he made me a stupefying proposition: that we eat acacia flowers. That was the first time I had met someone who ate flowers. In seconds Walter was up the tree and had gathered an enormous bouquet. Then he climbed down and showed me how to take off the corolla to suck the top. I tried it; the flower snapped a little under my teeth with a pleasing crackle, and a cool and delicate flavor that I had never tasted before spread inside my mouth.

For some time we remained silent eating acacia flowers. Suddenly he grabbed my hand: "Do you want to see our gang's 'headquarters'?" Sparks had lit up in Walter's eyes. I was a little scared. "Do you want to or no?" he asked again. I hesitated for a second. "I want to," I answered with a voice that was no longer mine and with a boldness that rushed up in me unexpectedly and that I felt did not belong to me. Walter took my hand and led me through a little door at the back of the yard to a deserted lot. Grass and weeds flourished there unchecked. Nettles stung my legs as we passed, and we had to push aside thick stems of hemlock and pull off burrs with our hands. We came to a crumbling wall at the back of the lot. In front of the wall were a ditch and a deep hole. Walter jumped inside and called me after him; the hole opened into the wall and we entered through there into an abandoned cellar.

The steps were in ruins and full of weeds, the walls percolated humidity, and in front of us there was total darkness. Walter squeezed my hand tightly and pulled me along. We slowly climbed down about ten steps. There we stopped.

"We have to stay here," he said, "we can't go further. In the back there are some iron men with iron hands and iron heads, grown out of the ground. They don't move and if they get us in the dark, they'll strangle us."

I turned my head and looked desperately above us through the open mouth of the cellar with the light that came from a simple and clear world where there weren't any iron men and where plants, people and houses could be seen in the far distance.

Walter brought a board from somewhere and we sat on it. We remained silent for some minutes. It was nice and cool in the cellar; the air had a strong odor of humidity, and I would have stayed there for hours alone, far from the blazing streets and the dull sad town. It felt good to be enclosed between the cool walls, below the earth that seethed in the sun. The useless drone of the afternoon came through the open mouth of the cellar like a

distant echo.

"We bring the girls we catch here," said Walter.

I only understood vaguely what he was talking about. The cellar took on a mysterious allure.

"And what do you do with them?"

Walter laughed.

"What, you don't know? We do what men do with women, we lie down next to them and... with the feather..."

"With the feather? What kind of feather? What do you do with the girls?"

Walter laughed again.

"How old are you? You don't know what men do with women? You don't have a feather? Look at mine."

He took out a small black bird feather from the pocket of his tunic.

In that moment I felt one of my familiar spells coming on. Maybe if Walter hadn't taken out the feather from his pocket, I would have borne the air of complete and desolate isolation to the very end. But in a second this isolation took on a painful and profound meaning. I realized then how far the cellar was from the town and its dusty streets. It was as if I had separated from myself, in the solitude of a subterranean depth, the underside of a summer day. The shiny black feather that Walter showed me meant that nothing existed anymore in the world I knew. Everything entered into a swoon where the feather glittered weirdly, in the middle of the strange room with its moist weeds, in the darkness that sucked in light like a cold, avid, gaping mouth.

"Hey, what's wrong with you?" asked Walter. "I'm going to tell you what we do with the feather..."

The sky outside, which could be seen through the mouth of the cellar, became still whiter and more vaporous. The words bounced off the walls and washed over me softly as if I were a liquid being.

Walter continued to talk to me. He was so far from me, however, and so aerial that he seemed just a clarity in the darkness, a patch of fog stirring in shadow.

"First, you caress the girl"—I listened as in a dream—"then still with the feather you caress yourself... You have to know this stuff..."

Suddenly Walter came near me and began to shake me as if to wake me from sleep. Gradually I began to revive. When I opened my eyes, Walter was

leaning over my pubis with his mouth pressed to my sex. It was impossible for me to understand what was happening.

Walter got to his feet.

"You see, that did you some good... Indians at war revive the injured like that, and in our gang we know all the spells and Indian cures."

I awoke drunk and tired. Walter took off and disappeared. I climbed the steps carefully.

In the following days I looked for him everywhere but it was no use. The only thing for me to do was to meet him in the cellar, but when I got there the vacant lot appeared completely changed. Piles of garbage were spread out everywhere, with dead animals and decaying matter that smelled horribly in the sun. With Walter I hadn't seen any of this. I gave up on going all the way to the cellar and never saw Walter again.

I procured a feather that I kept in great secrecy wrapped in a piece of newspaper in my pocket. Sometimes it seemed to me that I had invented the whole story with the feather and that Walter had never existed. From time to time I would unwrap the feather from the newspaper and look at it for a long time: its mystery was impenetrable. I would pass its silky and soft luster over my cheek and this caress thrilled me a little as if an invisible though real person had touched my face with their fingertips. The first time I used it was on a beautiful evening, under quite extraordinary circumstances.

I used to like staying out late. That evening a heavy and oppressive storm had come up. All the heat of the day had condensed into an overpowering atmosphere, under a black sky split with lightning. I was sitting in the doorway of a house watching the play of electric light on the walls of the street. The wind shook the lamp that lit the road and the concentric circles of the globe, casting shadows on the walls, tossed like water stirred up in a vessel. Long scarves of dust rose from the road and went up in spirals.

Suddenly, in a coiling of wind, it seemed to me like a white marble statue was rising up in the air. In that moment it was an uncontrollable certainty like all certainty. The white block of stone flew up swiftly in an oblique direction similar to a balloon escaped from the hand of a child. In a few seconds the statue became just a patch of white in the sky, the size of my fist. I now saw distinctly two white figures holding hands and gliding across the sky like skiers.

At that moment a young girl stopped in front of me. I must have been sitting with my mouth gaping and my eyes open wide turned up to the sky

because she asked me in amazement what I saw up there.

"Look... a statue flying... look quick... it's going to disappear soon..."

The girl looked attentively knitting her brows and told me that she saw nothing. She was a girl from the neighborhood, chubby, with cheeks the color of red rubber and hands that were always moist. Until that evening I had only rarely spoken to her. Now as she stood in front of me, she suddenly started to laugh:

"I know why you fooled me..." she said "...I know what you want..."

She started to move away from me hopping on one foot. I got up and ran after her; I called her into a dark passageway and she came without resisting. There I lifted her dress. Docile, she let herself be handled holding herself up by my shoulders. Maybe she was more surprised by what was happening than she was conscious of any immodesty in the act.

The most surprising consequence of this affair took place after a few days in the middle of a square. Some bricklayers were slaking lime in a box. I was watching the lime boiling when suddenly I heard my name called and someone said loudly: "With the feather then... with the feather... right?" He was a boy of about twenty, an insufferable brawny fellow with ruddy skin. I think he lived in a house in the dark passageway. I saw him for only a second shouting at me across the box, emerging fantastically from the steam of the lime like an infernal apparition speaking in the middle of the fire and thunder. Maybe he said something else and my imagination gave his words a meaning that I was preoccupied with in those days; I couldn't believe that he had really seen something in the opaque darkness of the passageway. Nevetheless, thinking more about this, it occurred to me that maybe the passageway had not been as dark as it had seemed and that everything had been visible (maybe I had even been standing in the light)... such suppositions strengthened my conviction that during the sexual act I was possessed by a dream that clouded my vision and senses. I resolved to be much more prudent. Who knows in what aberrations I would have indulged, in broad daylight, under the power of arousal and possessed by it as if I were moving unconsciously in deep sleep?

In close connection with the feather, a very disturbing little black book also comes to mind. I had found it once on some table and had leafed through it with great interest. It was an ordinary novel, *Frida*, by André Theuriet in an illustrated edition with lots of drawings. In each one there appeared a little blond boy with curly hair in velvet clothing and a chubby little girl in

a flouncey dress. The little boy resembled Walter. The children appeared in the pictures, now together, now apart; one could see clearly that they met most often in the secret hideaways of a park or under the ruins of a wall. What did they do together? That's what I would have liked to know. Did the little boy have a feather like me that he kept in his pocket? It didn't show in the drawings and I didn't have time to read it. A few days later the little black book disappeared without a trace. I looked for it everywhere. I asked about it at the bookstores but it seemed that no one had ever heard of it. It must have been a book full of secrets since it couldn't be found anywhere.

One day I screwed up my courage and went into a public library. A tall pale gentleman, with glasses that trembled lightly on his nose, sat in a chair at the back of the room and watched me coming. I couldn't turn back. I had to go up to the table and pronounce distinctly the sensational word "Frida" like a confession of all my hidden vices in front of the myopic gentleman. I drew close to the desk and murmured the name of the book in a faint voice. The librarian's glasses began to tremble even more; he closed his eyes as if he would find something in his memory and said that he had not "heard" of it. Even so the trembling of the glasses seemed to betray an internal disturbance; now I was sure that *Frida* contained the most secret and the most sensational revelations.

Many years later I found the book on the shelves of a bookstore. It was no longer my little book bound in black cloth but a humble, miserable booklet with a yellowish cover. For a second I wanted to buy it but thought better of it and put it back on the shelf. And so, to this day I keep intact within me the image of a little black book that contains a little of the authentic perfume of my childhood.

In small and insignificant objects: a black bird feather; an ordinary little book; an old photograph of fragile and unreal characters, seemingly suffering from a grave internal illness; a tender ashtray of green faience, shaped like an oak leaf, always smelling of stale ashes; in the simple and elementary recollection of Samuel Weber's glasses with the thick lenses; in such trivial ornaments and domestic things I recover all the melancholy of my childhood and that essential nostalgia of the uselessness of the world, which surrounds me everywhere like petrified waves of water. Raw matter—in its profound and heavy mass of earth, stone, sky, and water—or in its most incomprehensible forms: paper flowers, mirrors, glass marbles with their enigmatic inner spirals, or colored statues—always held me imprisoned within its walls, which I beat against painfully, and perpetuated in me, meaninglessly, the bizarre adventure of being human.

Wherever my thoughts turned, they encountered objects and immobility like walls before which I had to kneel.

Terrorized by their diversity, I thought of the infinite forms of matter and I tossed and turned all night long, agitated by series of objects that strung themselves in my memory endlessly like a mechanical stairway that ceaselessly unwound thousands upon thousands of steps.

Sometimes, in order to dam the wave of things and colors that flooded my brain, I would imagine the evolution of a single contour, or a single object.

I imagined to myself, for instance—and this like an accurate catalogue of the world—the chain of everyone's shadow cast on earth, a strange, fantastical and ashen world that sleeps at the feet of life.

The black man, lying like a veil over the grass, with slender legs that flow like water, with arms of dark iron, walking through horizontal trees with weeping branches.

The shadows of ships gliding over the sea, unstable aquatic shadows like sadness that comes and goes, gliding over foam.

The shadows of birds that fly like black birds come from the depths of

the earth, from a somber aquarium.

And the solitary shadow of our round planet, lost somewhere in space.

At other times I would think about caverns and hollows, from the mountain chasms with their dizzying heights to the warm and elastic, ineffable, sexual cavern. I had procured—from where I don't know—a small flashlight, and at night in bed, crazed by sleeplessness and by the objects that filled the room, ceaselessly presenting themselves, I would go under the blankets and follow in tense concentration the folds of the sheets and the small valleys that formed between them, like a kind of intimate study without purpose. I needed a precise and meticulous occupation in order to calm myself. One time my father found me at midnight moving about under the pillows and took the flashlight from me. He did not comment, however, nor did he scold me. I think for him the discovery had been so bizarre that he could not find the vocabulary nor the morality that could have been applied to such a case.

Some years later, I saw a photograph of a wax mold of the inside of the ear in an anatomy book. All the canals, sinuses and holes were filled, forming their positive image. This photograph made a great impression on me, almost to the point of swooning. In an instant I realized that the world could exist in a truer reality, in a positive structure of its caverns, in such a way that everything that is hollow becomes full, and the actual reliefs change into voids of identical form without any content, like those delicate and bizarre fossils that reproduce in stone some shell or leaf that in the course of time have macerated, leaving only the deeply sculpted and fine imprints of their contour.

In such a world people would no longer have been some multi-colored fleshy excrescences, full of complicated organs susceptible to decay, but pure cavities, floating like air bubbles through water, through the warm and soft matter of the filled world. It was just such an intimate and painful sentiment that I would often feel in adolescence, when, in the course of the endless vagabondage, I would wake abruptly in the middle of a terrible isolation, as if the people and houses around me had been glued together into a compact and uniform mass of one material, in which I existed only as a simple void that went uselessly here and there.

As a whole the objects formed a setting. The impression of the spectacular accompanied me everywhere with the feeling that everything evolved in the middle of a factitious and sad representation. When I did escape the dull and boring vision of a colorless world, its theatric, emphatic and obsolete

aspect would appear.

Within the framework of this general spectacle, other more astounding spectacles existed that attracted me more because of their artificiality and because the actors that participated in them seemed to truly understand the mystification of the world.

They alone knew that in a spectacular and decorative world, it was necessary that life be played in a false and ornamental way.

The cinema and the panopticon were such spectacles.

Oh! the movie theater B., long and dark like a sunk submarine! The doors to the entrance were covered with large crystal mirrors in which a part of the street was reflected. There was thus a free show at the entrance, before the one in the theater, an amazing screen in which the street appeared in the greenish light of dreams with people and carriages that moved like sleepwalkers in its waters.

In the theater the putrid and acidic heat of the public baths dominated. The floor was of cement and when they moved, the chairs emitted creaks like short, desperate screeches. In front of the screen a gallery of pretzel vendors and ne'er-do-wells cracked seeds and commented on the film out loud. The titles were pronounced syllable by syllable by dozens of mouths at once, like the reading of some text at a school for adults. The orchestra that played just under the screen was composed of a pianist, a violinist and an old Jew who plucked away on the contrabass. This old man also had the job of emitting different sounds corresponding to the action on the screen. He cried "cock-a-doodle-doo" when the beginning of the movie showed the rooster of the film company, but once I remember, when they were showing the life of Jesus, at the moment of the resurrection, he began to beat the sound box of the contrabass frenetically with the bow in order to imitate celestial thunder.

I experienced the episodes in the film with an extraordinary intensity, integrating myself into the action like a real character of the drama. Many times the film would absorb me so much that I would imagine I was walking through the parks on the screen, or that I was leaning against the balustrade of the Italian terraces where Francesca Bertini performed so touchingly, with her disheveled hair and agitated arms like scarves.

Decidedly, there is no well-established difference between our real self and the different characters of our imagination. When the light went on during intermission, the theater had the air of having come back from afar. It was a somewhat precarious and artificial atmosphere, much more uncertain and

more ephemeral than the spectacle on the screen. I would close my eyes and wait until the mechanical whirring of the projector announced that the film was continuing; I would then find the theater in darkness once again and all the people around me, lit indirectly by the screen, pale and transfigured like a gallery of marble statues in a museum illuminated by the moon at midnight.

One time the cinema caught fire. The film tore and lit up so quickly that for a few seconds the flames of the fire appeared on the screen like a kind of honest warning that the cinema was burning, a logical continuation of the role of the projector to present the "news" and whose mission it was, through an excess of perfectionism, to represent the latest and the most thrilling news—that of its own fire. Shouts and cries of "Fire! Fire!" broke out from all parts like gunshots. So much noise poured from the theater that it seemed that the spectators, until now quietly sitting in the dark, had done no more than to amass shouts and rumblings within themselves, like calm and inoffensive batteries that explode when their charging capacity is violently surpassed.

In a few minutes and before half the theater was evacuated, the "fire" was extinguished. Nevertheless, the spectators continued to shout as if they had to use up a certain amount of energy that had been released. A young woman, with her face powdered like plaster of Paris, screamed while staring into my eyes, without making any movement or taking any steps toward the exit. A muscular pretzel seller, convinced of the usefulness of his strength in such situations, but not knowing how to apply it, took the wooden chairs in turn and flung them at the screen. Suddenly, a full and sonorous boom was heard: a chair had hit the old musician's contrabass. The cinema was full of suprises.

In the summer I would go to the matinee early and come out when it began to get dark. The light outside was changed; the day, nearly over, was waning. I observed that in my absence an immense and essential event had taken place in the world like a kind of sad obligation to carry on the ceaseless work—night falling for instance—regular, diaphanous, and spectacular. Thus I would once again enter into the middle of a certainty, which through its daily rigor seemed to me of an endless melancholy. In such a world, subject to the most theatric effects and obliged every evening to produce a correct sunset, the people around me seemed like poor pitiful beings with their seriousness and their naive belief in what they did and what they felt. There was only one being in town who understood these things and for whom I had an

admiration full of respect: it was the town madwoman. She alone among the rigid people chock full of prejudices and conventions, she alone had kept the freedom of screaming and dancing in the streets when she wanted to. She went through the streets ragged, covered with filth, toothless, with red disheveled hair, holding in her arms, with a motherly tenderness, an old box full of crusts of bread and various objects picked out of the trash.

She showed her sex to passers-by with a gesture that would have been described as "full of elegance and style" had it been deployed for another purpose. "How splendid, how sublime it is to be crazy!" I would say to myself, and observe with unimaginable regret how powerful stupid and familiar habits were, and that crushing rational upbringing separated me from the extreme freedom of a life of madness.

I believe that anyone who has not had this feeling is condemned to never feel the true fullness of the world.

The general and elementary impression of the spectacular would become a true terror once I went into a panopticon with wax figures. It was a fear mixed with a kind of vague pleasure and, somehow, with that bizarre sensation that we each have sometimes of having already lived in a certain milieu. I believe that if ever the sense of a purpose in life were to be born in me and if this beginning were to be related to some truly profound, essential and irremediable part of me, then my body would have to become a wax figure in a panopticon and my life a simple and endless contemplation of sideshow windows.

In the gloomy light of the carbide lamps, I felt that truly, I lived my own life in a unique and inimitable way. All my everyday actions could be shuffled like a deck of cards, I wasn't bound to any of them; the irresponsibility of people in face of their most conscious acts was strikingly self-evident. What importance did it have that I or another committed these acts when the diversity of the world froze them in the same uniform monotony? Only in the panopticon was there no contradiction between what I did and what happened. The wax characters were the only authentic things in the world; they alone falsified life ostentatiously, taking part, through their strange and artificial immobility, in the true atmosphere of the world. The uniform, riddled by bullets and stained with blood, of some Austrian archduke, with the yellow and sad face, was infinitely more tragic than any true death. In a crystal case lay a woman clothed in black lace, with a gleaming pale face. An amazingly red rose was affixed between her breasts, and a blond wig was

beginning to detach itself along the edge of her forehead, while the pink color of the makeup palpitated in her nostrils and the blue eyes, limpid as glass, watched me unmoving. The woman of wax must have had a deep and disturbing significance that no one knew about. The more I contemplated her, the more her meaning seemed to become clearer, persisting vaguely somewhere in my mind like a word I wanted to remember but of which I only caught a faraway rhythm.

I've always had a bizarre attraction for feminine fripbelows and cheaply decorated artificial objects. A friend of mine would collect the most diverse things that he could find. In a mahogany box he kept hidden a band of black silk edged with thin lace, sewn with some glittering rhinestone spangles. It was no doubt torn from some old ball gown: here and there the silk had begun to mold. In order to see it I would give him stamps and even money. Then he would lead me into an old-fashioned parlor and show it to me while his parents slept. I would remain with the piece of silk in my hand, mute with stupefaction and pleasure. My friend would stand in the doorway and watch to make sure no one was coming; after a few minutes he would come over and take the lace from me, put it back in the box and say: "There, now it's over, you can't anymore," as Clara would also sometimes say when the dallying in the dressing room lasted too long.

Another object that disturbed me exceedingly the first time I saw it was a gypsy ring. I believe it was the most fantastic ring that a man could invent to adorn the hand of a woman.

The extraordinary masquerade ornaments of birds, animals and flowers, all destined to play a sexual role; the ultramodern and stylized tail of the bird of paradise, the oxidized feathers of the peacock, the hysterical lace on the petals of petunias, the improbable blue of monkey pouches are only pale attempts at sexual ornamentation next to the stunning gypsy ring. It was a superb tin object, fine, grotesque and hideous. Especially hideous: it attacked love in the darkest regions, at its base. A true cry of sex.

Surely, the artist who worked on the ring was inspired by the visions of the panopticon. The stone in the ring, which was just a piece of glass melted into the thickness of a lens, resembled, in every respect, the magnifying glass in the dioramas through which I saw sunken ships, greatly enlarged, battles with Turks and assassinations of kings. In the ring there was a bouquet of flowers chiseled in tin or lead and painted with all the violent colors of the pictures in the panopticon.

The purple of asphyxiated cadavers next to the pornographic red of garters, the lead pallor of the enraged waves in the interior of a macabre light, like the semi-obscurity of vaults covered in glass. It was all surrounded by small coppery leaves and mysterious signs. Hallucinating.

In this way, everything that is imitated impresses me. Artificial flowers for instance and funeral wreaths, but particularly funeral wreaths, forgotten and dusty in their oval glass boxes in the graveyard chapel, surrounding old anonymous names with an obsolete delicacy, sunk in an eternity without resonance.

Cut out pictures that children play with and cheap statues from fairs. With time these statues lose their heads or a hand and their owner, in repairing them, cover their delicate necks with a scrofula of white plaster. The bronze on the rest of the statue then takes on the significance of a tragic but noble suffering. There are still Jesuses in their natural grandeur in catholic churches. The stained glass windows cast the last reflections of a red sunset, while at this hour of day the lilies exhale the plenitude of their heavy and lugubrious perfume at the feet of Christ. In this atmosphere full of airy blood and aromatic swoon, a pallid youth plays the last chords of a desperate melody on the organ.

All these have immigrated into life from the panopticon. I find in the fair attraction the common gathering place of all these nostalgias spread throughout the world, which once gathered, form in themselves its essence.

A unique and supreme wish remains for me in life: to see the panopticon on fire; to see the slow and scabrous melting of the wax bodies, to watch mesmerized while the beautiful yellow legs of the bride in the glass box coil up in the air and take between her thighs a real flame that burns her sex.

Apart from the panopticon, the fair in the month of August brought me many other sadnesses and exaltations. The full spectacle swelled like a symphony, from the prelude of isolated attractions that arrived much before the others and that indicated the general tone of the fair, like the prolonged stray notes that announce the entire theme of the composition at the beginning of the concert, to the grandiose conclusion, bursting forth with shouts, shots and fanfare on the culminating day, followed by the immense silence of the field, deserted once again.

The few attractions that came early encompassed, in essence, the whole fair and represented it exactly. It was enough that only the first of them were set up, for all the colors, all the brilliance and all the carbide smell of the whole fair to descend into town.

In the myriad of everyday noises you could suddenly make out a chirring that wasn't a squeaking of tin, nor the faraway clinking of a bunch of keys, nor the whizzing of a motor, a noise easily recognized among a thousand others and that belonged to the "Wheel of Fortune."

In the obscurity of the boulevard a tiara of colored glass would light up toward evening, like the earth's first constellation. Soon others would follow and the boulevard became a luminous corridor, along which I would wander, speechless, as I had once seen, in an illustrated edition of Jules Verne, a boy my age, leaning against the porthole of a submarine, looking out into the suboceanic darkness, at the wonderful and mysterious marine phosphorescences.

The fair moved in several days later. The semi-circle of shacks was set up and suddenly became a definite thing.

Well-established zones divided it into areas of shadow and light—the same ones every year. First, there was the series of restaurants with dozens of strings of colored lights, then the sideshows with the monstrosities, the circus facade bathed in light and finally, the obscure and humble photographers' shacks. Everyone walked around in circles, passing in turn through maxi-

mum brightness then through darkness, like the moon in the drawing in my geography book that alternately traversed the white and black typographic zones.

Above all, I would go into the small and badly lit sideshows that had only a few performers and that lacked even a roof over the shack; at the entrance my father negotiated a reduced group price with the manager for our large and numerous family. The show there had an uncertain and improvised aspect. The cool night breeze blew over the heads of the spectators, and high above us all the stars glittered in the sky. We were lost in a fair sideshow, having wandered in from the chaos of the night, on the infinitesimal point in space of a planet. On that point, on that planet people and dogs performed on a stage; the people throwing different objects in the air and catching them, the dogs jumping through hoops and walking on two legs. Where was all this happening? The sky above us seemed still more immense...

One time, in one of these impoverished shacks, a performer announced in front of the public a prize of five thousand lei to the one who could imitate the sensational and easy number that he was going to perform. There were only a few people on the benches. A fat gentleman that I'd known for a long time as a skinflint without equal in town, dumbfounded by this unimaginable possibility of winning an enormous sum in a fair sideshow abruptly changed seats, moving a few benches closer to the stage, determined to follow each gesture of the performer with the utmost attention, in order to reproduce it afterwards and cash in the prize.

A few moments of agonizing silence followed.

The performer moved closer to the railing: "Gentlemen," he said in a hoarse voice, "you will see cigarette smoke blown out through the throat." He lit a cigarette and taking his hand off his collar where he had been holding it the whole time, exhaled a thin ribbon of bluish smoke through the orifice of an artificial larynx that he had probably acquired through an operation. The gentleman up front sat stunned and embarrassed, turned red up to his ears and going back to his seat grumbled loudly through clenched teeth, "Sure, no wonder, if he's got a thingamajig in his throat!"

Imperturbable, the performer responded from the stage: "Hey, hey, you only have to—" Maybe he really was ready to give a prize to a fellow sufferer...

In similar shacks, to earn their daily bread, pale and shriveled old men swallowed stones and soap in front of the public, young girls contorted their bodies, and anemic emaciated children, leaving off the corn they were eating, climbed on the stage and danced, jiggling the bells tied to their itzari.

During the day, in early afternoon, in the fiery heat of the sun, the desolation of the fair was endless. The immobility of the wooden ponies, with their bulging eyes and bronze manes, captured some terrible melancholy of their petrified life. From the shacks came the hot smell of grub, while a lone street organ, somewhere far, insisted on trickling out its waltz asthmatically, from the chaos of which, from time to time, a metallic whistling note spurted out like a sudden jet d'eau, high and thin, squirted from a basin of water.

I liked to stand, hours at a time, in front of the photograph shacks, contemplating the people unknown to me, in groups or singly, petrified and smiling, in front of gray landscapes with waterfalls and far-off mountains. All the characters, through their common surroundings, seemed to be members of the same family, starting off on an excursion from the same picturesque place where they had been photographed one after the other.

One time, in such a window I came across my own photograph. This sudden encounter with myself, immobilized in a fixed attitude, there at the edge of the fair, had a depressing effect on me.

Before arriving in my town, it had of course traveled through other places unknown to me. For a moment I had the feeling that I didn't exist other than in this photograph. This reversal of mental position happened to me often in the most diverse circumstances. It would creep up on me, suddenly transforming my interior body. I would watch an accident on the street for instance for a minute or two like any other spectator. Suddenly though, my whole perspective would change and—like in that game which consists in seeing in the wall paint whatever strange animal that we don't see anymore the next day because instead, we see formed from the same decorative elements, a statue, a woman or a scenery—in the accident on the street, all remained intact; all of a sudden I would see people and all things around me from the point of view of the wounded person as if it were I who was lying stretched out on the road and who saw everything from that position, from top to bottom, from center to periphery, and with the live sensation of the blood flowing out of me. In the same way, without any effort, like the logical consequence of the simple fact that I was watching, at the cinema I imagined myself living in the intimacy of the scenes on the screen, and I saw myself thus in front of the photograph shack, from the position of the one who looked at me motionlessly from the photograph.

My own life, the life of the one in flesh and blood beyond the window, appeared to me suddenly indifferent and insignificant as the travels through unknown cities of the me in the photograph appeared absurd to the live

persons on the other side of the glass.

In the same way in which the photograph of me went from place to place contemplating ever new perspectives through dirty and dusty windowpanes, I too from beyond the glass led my unchanging character here and there, forever looking at new things and forever not understanding anything about them. The fact that I moved, that I was alive, could only be by chance, a chance that had no meaning, because just as I existed on this side of the window, I could exist on the other side, with the same pale face, the same eyes, the same dull hair, that converged in the mirror as a bizarre and quick figure beyond understanding.

Various warnings came to me from the outside to immobilize me and brusquely take away my everyday understanding. They stupefied me, stopped me in place and summed up in an instant all the inutility of the world.

Everything appeared chaotic in that second, as when listening to a fanfare and stopping my ears and then lifting my fingers for an instant, all the music seemed like pure noise.

I walked around the fair all day long, especially around the surrounding field, where the performers and the freaks from the sideshows gathered around the cauldron of mamaliga, disheveled and dirty, abandoned their beautiful costumes and nocturnal existences as acrobats, bodiless women and sirens, and joined in the common throng and in the misery of their irremediable humanity. What appeared wondrous, carefree and sometimes even opulent in the sideshows, here at the back, in broad daylight, fell back to a mean and insipid familiarity like the world over.

One day I attended the burial of the child of one of the traveling photographers.

The doors of the sideshow were open wide and inside, in front of the backdrops used in the photographs, lay an open coffin on two chairs.

The background canvas showed a splendid park with a terrace in the Italian style and marble columns.

In this dream surrounding, the small corpse, with his hands crossed on his chest, in festive clothes, with silver tinsel in his buttonholes, seemed bathed in an ineffable beatitude.

The child's parents and various females wept hopelessly around the coffin, while outside the fanfare of the biggest circus, borrowed from the director for free, gravely intoned a serenade from Intermezzo, the saddest piece in the program.

In those moments, the corpse was surely inexpressibly happy and serene, in the intimacy of his profound peace, in the endless silence of the park with its plane trees. Soon however, he was wrenched away from the solemnity in which he lay and laid in a wagon to be taken to the cemetery into the clammy pit that was his destination.

After his departure the park remained desolate and deserted. In the fair, death also borrowed in this way from the factitious decorations full of nostalgia, as if the fair made up a world apart, whose purpose was to demonstrate the infinite melancholy of the artificial ornaments, from the beginning of life to the end, and with the real life example of some pale existences, consumed in the gray light of the panopticon, or in the room of the photograph shows with the boundless wall, lost in supraterrestrial beauties.

In this way, the fair became for me a deserted island, bathed in desolate aureoles, similar in all things to the indistinct though clear world into which the spells from my childhood carried me.

The upper floor of the Weber place, where I often went since the death of old Etla Weber, resembled a true panopticon. All afternoon in the sunlit rooms dust and heat wafted about along the glass cabinets full of discarded things, thrown on the shelves at random. The beds had been moved to the ground floor and the rooms had remained empty. Old Samuel Weber (agency and commission) together with his two sons, Paul and Ozy, now lived in the rooms below.

In the first room, facing the street, an office had been set up. It was a room that smelled of mildew, stuffed with ledgers and envelopes containing samples of cereals, papered with old advertisements stained by flies.

Some of the advertisements, having been on the walls for years, had completely integrated themselves into the life of the family. Above the safe, an advertisement for mineral water showed a tall slender woman, in diaphanous veils, pouring the salutary remedy for the invalids at her feet. Surely, during the secret hours of the night, Ozy Weber also came to drink from the miraculous source, with his thin arms like flutes and the hump on his chest sticking out from under his clothes like the bulging sternum of a turkey.

The other familiar advertisement, that of a transportation company—with its ship gliding along curly waves—completed the person of Samuel Weber and accorded his captain's hat and glasses with the thick lenses, a third marine element. When old Samuel closed some ledger and clamped it under the press turning the iron bar, it truly seemed that he was turning the rudder of a ship over unknown seas. The pink cotton with which he plugged his ears dangled out in long threads and was surely a wise precaution against the ocean currents.

In the second room, Ozy read popular novels, sunk into a leather armchair, raising the volume high up in order to catch the weak light that came from the street into the office. In the obscurity of a corner the screen of a monumental tin spittoon in the form of a cat glittered, and on the walls a mirror weirdly reflected a square of gray light, like a ghostlike recollection of

the day outside.

I would come to see Ozy the way dogs would go into strange yards, because the gate is open and nobody chases them out. What especially attracted me was a strange game that I don't know which of us two had invented and under what circumstances. The game consisted of imaginative dialogues spoken with consummate seriousness. We had to remain serious to the very end and in no way betray the nonexistence of the things we talked about.

I came in and Ozy said to me in a frightfully detached tone, without raising his eyes from the book:

"The pyramidon that I took last night to sweat made me cough terribly. I tossed and turned 'til morning. Finally Matilda (there's no Maltilda) came just now and gave me a massage."

The absurdity and the stupidity of the things that Ozy strung together hit me over the head like powerful hammer blows. Maybe I should have left the room immediately, but I answered him in the same tone with the slight voluptuousness of deliberately lowering myself to his level. I believe this was the game's secret.

"Hey, I got a cold too," I said (it was July), "and Dr. Caramfil (existed) gave me a prescription. Too bad this doctor... you know, he was arrested this morning..."

Ozy raised his eyes from the book.

"You see, didn't I tell you a long time ago that he made counterfeit money..."

"Sure," I finished for him, "how else would he have spent so much on showgirls?"

There was above all a pleasure in this talk, a little nauseating, in sinking down into the mediocrity of the dialogue and at the same time a vague feeling of freedom. In this way I could freely calumniate the doctor who lived nearby and who I knew went to bed at 9 o'clock every evening.

We talked in this way about anything, mixing true things with imaginary ones, until the whole conversation took on a kind of airy independence, floating through the room, detached from us, similar to a curious bird whose exterior existence—if the bird had really appeared in front of us—we would not have doubted any more than the fact if our words had no connection to us.

When I came out again into the street, I had the sensation of having slept deeply. The dream continued however, seemingly forever, and I would watch with amazement people talking amongst themselves with seriousness: Didn't

they realize that anything could be talked about with gravity, absolutely anything?

Sometimes Ozy would not feel like talking and then he would take me with him to rummage through the floor. In the few years since the floor had been abandoned and through old Weber's habit of sending "upstairs" all the useless objects, the most diverse and extraordinary things had collected there.

In the room a fiery sun entered through the dusty curtainless windows. The cabinets with the glass panes shook easily when we tread on the old wood floor, like chattering teeth. Between the two rooms, a bead curtain served as a door.

I came up from below a little woozy from the heat of the day. The complete desertion of the rooms disturbed me. It was as if I existed in a world that I'd known for a long time, and that I couldn't remember well. My body had a strange sensation of lightness and detachment. This sensation became more profound when I had to pass between the two rooms separated by the bead curtain.

We were looking through the drawers for old correspondence in order to remove the stamps from the envelopes. A cloud of dust rose from the yellowed packets and little bugs came out and scurried for cover among the papers. Sometimes a letter fell out and opened to reveal antiquated and flowery handwriting, with the ink faded. There was something sad and resigned in it, a kind of weary conclusion to the flow of time since its composition, a quiet slumber in eternity, like that of funeral wreaths. I also found old-fashioned photographs, ladies dressed in crinoline or meditative gentlemen resting their forehead on one finger, with an anemic smile on their lips. At the bottom of the photograph two angels were carrying a basket of fruit and flowers with *porte visite* or *suvenir* written underneath. Between the photographs and the objects in the glass cabinets—a fruit bowl of pink glass with voluted edges, velvet handbags whose silken interiors were eaten by moths, various objects with mysterious monograms—in all these an air of perfect understanding dominated, like a life of their own, identical to the life of another time, for instance, when the photographs corresponded to some persons who moved and lived, and when the letters were written by a warm hand still living—however, a life reduced to a smaller scale, in a more confined space, within the limits of the letters and the photographs, like the scenery seen through the thick lenses of a binocular, scenery that remains exactly the same in all its components though miniscule and distant.

Toward evening, when I went back downstairs, I would often meet Paul Weber on the stairway. He kept a dresser above in the first room and would go up to change.

He was a ruddy fellow with big hands and disheveled hair. He had big, thick lips and a clown nose. In his eyes, however, there dwelled an ineffably calm and restful candor. Everything that Paul did had an air of detachment and indifference because of this look.

I loved him greatly, but in secret, and my heart beat terribly when I met him on the stairs. I liked the simplicity with which he spoke to me, always smiling, as if our conversation had, apart from its apparent meaning, another more distant and ephemeral. He kept this smile in the most serious conversations and even when he was discussing various business matters with old Weber. I loved Paul also for the secret life that he led apart from his daily affairs, from which only echoes reached me, whispered in amazement by the grown-ups around me. Paul spent all the money that he earned at the variety show, on women. There was an irremediable fatality in his dissipation, which old Weber came up against like a wall. One time the whole town buzzed with the rumor that Paul had unharnessed the horses from the carriages in the square and brought them into the variety hall where he had improvised a kind of circus, with a competition for the most eminent drunkards in town. Another time it was rumored that he had taken a bath in champagne with a woman. But then what wasn't said about him?

It was impossible for me to define my sympathy for Paul. I saw clearly the people around me; I saw the futility and the boredom with which they consumed their lives, the young girls in the park laughing stupidly, the merchants with their crafty looks full of self-importance, the theatrical necessity for my father to play his role of father, the exhaustion of the beggars asleep in dirty corners; all these merged to form a general and banal aspect, as if the world, as it was, had been biding a long time in me, constructed in its final form, and I, every day, doing no more than verifying its antiquated contents.

It was all simple; only Paul was outside of it, in the density of compact life and absolutely inaccessible to my understanding.

I held all the gestures and the slightest attitudes deep inside of me, but not as a memory of them but rather as their double existence. Many times I would endeavor to walk as he walked; I would study a certain gesture and repeat it in front of the mirror until I believed that I had repeated it exactly.

On the floor of the Weber place, Paul was the finest and the most enigmatic wax figure. Before long he brought a pale woman there, with gestures

and a walk of silent mechanism that the place had been lacking...

The floor thus completed its panopticon gallery, beginning with the ship captain Samuel Weber to the delicate and crushed phenomenon of the infantile Ozy.

I found antiques and objects full of melancholy on another abandoned floor, at my grandfather's house. The walls there were covered with strange pictures, in thick gilded wood frames or thinner ones in red plush. There were also some frames made of small seashells arranged side by side, worked with a meticulousness that had me contemplating them for hours. Who had glued the seashells? What minute lively gestures had brought them together? Whole existences were suddenly reborn in such defunct works, lost in the fog of time like images in two facing mirrors, sunk in the greenish depths of dreams.

In a corner lay the gramophone with the upturned funnel, beautifully painted in yellow and pink stripes, like an enormous portion of vanilla and rose ice cream, and on the table there were different engravings two of which were representations of King Carol I and Queen Elisabeta.

These pictures intrigued me for a long time. The artist had a lot of talent, I thought, because the features showed a subtle and sure hand, but I didn't understand why he had used a gray watercolor, washed-out, as if the paper had been held under water for a long time.

One day I made an amazing discovery: what I had thought were faded colors was nothing other than a mass of miniscule letters, only decipherable with the help of a magnifying glass.

In the whole drawing there wasn't a single feature made with a pencil or brush; it was all an arrangement of words, which told the story of the life of the king and queen.

Suddenly my stupefaction overturned the incomprehension with which I had looked upon the drawings. My distrust in the art of the painter gave way to a newborn boundless admiration.

In it I felt the distress of not having observed the essential quality of the picture earlier and at the same time a growing uncertainty of all that I saw: since I had contemplated the drawings for so many years without discovering the material they were composed of, couldn't it be that through a similar

myopia the meaning of all the things around me escaped me, though it was inscribed in them, maybe as clearly as the letters making up the pictures?

Around me, the surface of the world suddenly took on strange sheens and uncertain opacities like that of curtains, opacities that become transparences and present us suddenly with the depth of a room when a light is turned on behind them.

Behind objects, however, no light was ever illuminated; they remained bathed in the volumes that enclosed them hermetically, and that seemed to dissolve sometimes to allow a glimpse of the real meaning of those objects.

There were other curiosities that were particular to the floor. The view of the street through the front windows for instance.

The walls of the house being very thick, the windows were set in deep, forming alcoves where you could lie comfortably. I would position myself in one of them as if I were in a little glass chamber and open the windows to the street.

The intimacy of the alcove as well as the pleasure of looking out at the street in comfort made me think of a vehicle of the same dimension, with soft pillows to lie on, with little windows through which I could look at the different cities and unfamiliar scenery while the vehicle traversed the world.

Once, while my father was relating some recollections from his childhood, I asked him what had been his most ardent and secret wish, and he answered that he had wished above all to possess a miraculous vehicle in which he could lie and go all over the world.

I knew that in his childhood he slept in the upper floor room with windows facing the street, and I asked him if he liked to lie in the window alcoves to look down below.

He answered with amazement that indeed every evening when he went up to bed he would climb into one of those alcoves and stay there for hours and would often fall asleep there. He had probably dreamt about the vehicle in the same place and under the same circumstances as I had.

Outside of the cursed places that secreted vertigos and swoons, there existed in the world then, other more benevolent spaces, through whose walls seeped beautiful and pleasing images.

The dream of the vehicle that traversed the world filtered through the walls of the alcove, and whoever sat ensconced in that place was slowly impregnated with this reverie like the intoxicating smoke of hashish...

The floor also had two garrets, one of which opened onto the roof through a skylight. I used to climb to the top of the house through there. The whole town spread out around me gray and amorphous to the far-off fields, where miniscule trains passed over the fragile toylike bridge.

What I wanted above all was not to feel any dizziness and to have a sense of balance equal to what I had below on the ground. I wanted to lead a "normal" life on the roof and to move about in the thin and biting air of the heights, without fear and without any particular awareness of the void. I thought that if I could have succeeded in that, I would have felt my weight become more elastic, more vaporous, which would have transformed me completely and made me into a kind of birdman. I was convinced that it was only my fear of falling that weighed me down, and the consciousness that I was at a great height went through me like a pain, which I wanted to be able to extirpate by the roots.

So that nothing would seem exceptional there above, I would force myself each time to do something specific and ordinary: to read, to eat or to sleep.

I would take the cherries and the bread that my grandfather gave me and climb up on the roof. I divided each cherry into quarters and ate them one by one so that my "normal" activity would last as long as possible. When I finished one, I would try to throw the pits down into a big cauldron in front of a shop.

As soon as I got down I would rush over to see how many pits had hit the target. There were always three or four in the cauldron. What disappointed me exceedingly though was that I wouldn't find more than another three or four around it. So I had actually eaten very few cherries while it seemed to me that I had been on the roof for hours. In my grandfather's room, on the clock's dial of green faience, I also noticed that only a few minutes had passed since I had gone up. Probably, time became increasingly dense to the extent that it was "spent" up above. I looked to prolong it to no avail, staying on the roof for as long as possible. Once below, I was always forced to acknowledge that a lot less time had passed than I imagined. This strengthened the strange feeling I had on the ground of indefiniteness, of incompleteness... Time, here below, was more rarefied than in reality; it contained less substance than up above and thus participated in the fragility of all things, which appeared so dense around me and which were yet so unstable, ready at any moment to abandon their meaning and their provisional contour to appear in the form of their exact existence...

...The floor disintegrated piece by piece, object by object after the death of my grandfather. He died in the small shabby and humid room in the yard, which he had chosen as a shelter in his old age and which he would not leave but for his last journey.

I went to see him there every day before he died and attended the prayer for the dying, which he performed by himself, with a trembling voice and without any emotion; afterwards he had put on a new white shirt so that the prayer would be more solemn.

It was in that room that I saw his dead body a few days later, stretched out on a tin table for the last ritual ablution. My grandfather had a brother who was a few years younger and whom he resembled in a striking way: they both had the same perfectly round head like a small sphere covered with brilliant white hair, the same keen and penetrating look, and the same beard with sparse hairs like froth full of air bubbles.

This uncle entreated the family for the honor of washing the dead body and though old and skinny, he set to work with great zeal.

He trembled from head to toe as he brought the buckets of water from the pump in the yard to heat them in the kitchen.

When the water was heated, he brought it to the room and began to wash the corpse with detergent and wisps of straw.

While scrubbing, he swallowed his tears and—as if grandfather could hear him—whispered to him, sobbing bitterly: "Look what I've come to... look what old age has brought me... you're dead now and I'm washing you... woe is me... to think I've lived to see... such a sad day..."

With his sleeves he wiped his cheeks and beard, wet with tears and sweat, and continued to wash the body with ever greater zeal. The two old men, amazing in their resemblance, one dead and the other washing him, made quite a hallucinatory picture. The people who worked at the cemetery and who usually did this work receiving a tip for it from the whole family sat in a corner and spitefully watched this intruder who was robbing them of their livelihood. They talked amongst themselves in a low voice, smoking and spitting on the ground in all directions. After about an hour of labor my grandfather's brother finished. The corpse was stretched out on the table facing down.

"Have you finished?" asked someone from the group, a little man with a red goatee, snapping his fingers nervously, full of malice.

"I've finished," the brother of the dead man answered. "Now come, let's get him dressed..."

"Aha! You've finished then," said the little man again, full of irony. "You think you've finished? You think that's how you put a dead man in the ground? In that state of filth?"

The poor old man stood in the middle of the room, bewildered, with a wisp of straw in his hand, watching us all, and imploring us with mute looks to defend him. He knew quite well that he had washed the corpse with great care and didn't think he deserved such an insult.

"Well, now I'll show you that you shouldn't get mixed up in things you know nothing about..." continued the little man brashly and snatching the wisp of straw from the old man's hand, rushed over to the table and with a quick movement, stuck it into the anus of the corpse and extracted a great chunk of excrement...

"You see that you don't know how to wash a corpse?" he said. "You wanted to bury him with this filth inside?"

My grandfather's brother was shaken by a violent trembling and burst into tears...

The burial took place on a scorching day in summer: nothing sadder and more impressive than a burial in the full heat and light of the sun when people and things appear a little bigger in the hot vapors as though seen through a magnifying glass.

What else could people do on such a day than bury their dead?

In the heat and torpor of the air, their gestures seemed to have been performed hundreds of years ago, the same then as now, as always. The damp grave inhaled the corpse into a coolness and darkness, which surely passed through him like a supreme felicity. Clods of earth fell heavily on the coffin while people in dusty clothes, sweating and weary, continued to live their imperious lives above ground.

A few days after grandfather's funeral, Paul Weber got married.

Paul was somewhat tired at the wedding, but he kept his smile, a sad forced smile that contained the beginning of a devotion. His neck, pink and bald, moved strangely in the stiff collar, opened at the front; his pants seemed longer and thinner than usual; the tails of his coat hung down grotesquely like on a clown. Paul epitomized all the grave absurdity of the ceremony. I embodied its more secret and intimate one. I was the small clown that no one noticed.

At the back of the dark salon, the bride waited in her chair on the dais. The white veil covered her face and only when she came out from under the canopy and raised it did I see Edda for the first time... The tables set for the guests were lined up in a single row in the yard; all the tramps in town had gathered at the gate; the sky was the indefinite color of yellow clay; the pale maids of honor in dresses of blue and pink silk handed out small candies in silver foil. It was a wedding. The musicians scraped out an old sad waltz; from time to time its rhythm swelled, grew and seemed to rise, then the melody became attenuated once again, more and more, until nothing remained but the metallic strain of a single flute.

The day was horribly long, too long for a wedding. Nobody came to the back of the yard where the hotel stables were and where I stood on a hillock to watch the wedding from a distance while around me some hens pecked at the grain between blades of grass, and the sad waltz wafted over toward the yard interweaving with the fresh smell of moist hay in the stables. From there I saw Paul doing something extraordinary: he was talking with Ozy and no doubt he was saying something funny, maybe an anecdote, because the invalid began laughing, turning purple, almost suffocating under the bulging shirtfront of his starched shirt.

Finally, night fell. The few trees in the yard sank into darkness hollowing out a mysterious and invisible park in the obscurity.

In the poorly lit parlor the bride was still sitting upon the dais next to

Paul, bending her head toward him when he said something to her in a low voice and letting her soft arm rest between his fingers, which caressed it along her white glove. Some cakes were brought to the table; one in particular was monumental like a castle fortified with crenels and thousands of pink cream buttresses. The petals of the flowers made out of sugar covering the cake shone matte and oily. A knife was thrust in the middle and a rose screaked faintly under the blade, shattering like glass into many pieces. The old matrons walked majestically in their velvet dresses, with innumerable jewels on their chests and on their fingers, advancing slowly and solemnly like small, heavily ornamented, ambulating altars.

Little by little the salon grew darker and all that I saw became more vague and more absurd... I fell asleep looking at my red and burning hands.

I woke up in a room that smelled of acrid smoke. In a mirror in front of me the window reflected the dawn that showed itself as a perfect square of blue silk. I was lying on a rumpled bed piled with pillows. A faint noise reverberated in my ear like the susurration inside a shell; in the room the thin smoke still hung in layers.

I tried to get up and my hand encountered the wood carvings of the bed; there were some that just filled my hand and others that went off, growing in the pale light of the room, and hollowing out thousands of crenels, holes and lacey mildew. Moments later the room filled with all kinds of apparitional volutes through which I had to pass, clearing a path for myself among them to the door. My head kept buzzing and all the caverns of the air seemed to repeat this murmur. In the hallway a cold white light washed over my cheeks and woke me completely. I ran into a gentleman in a long nightshirt who looked at me angrily as if he were reproaching me for being dressed so early in the morning.

Except for him there was no one else. Below in the yard the tables for the guests had been left with their fir boards uncovered. The day was overcast and cold. The wind scattered the colored candy wrappers through the deserted yard. How had the bride held her head? How had she leaned it on Paul's shoulder? In some of the panopticons the woman of wax had a mechanism that made her tilt her head to the side and close her eyes.

The streets of the town had lost all meaning; the chill penetrated through my clothes; I was sleepy and cold. When I closed my eyes the wind laid a colder face on mine; it felt like a mask on the other side of my eyelids, the mask of my face whose interior was dark and cold like the back of a real

mask of metal. Which house on my path was set to explode? Which pole was going to twist itself like a nightstick to grimace over me? Nowhere in the world, under any circumstances, did anything ever happen.

When I arrived at the square, people were unloading meat for the butchers' sheds. They were carrying whole halves of cattle in their arms, crimson and veined, moist with blood, tall and superb like dead princesses. In the air the hot smell of meat and urine; the butcher hung each beast with the head down, their globulous black eyes turned to the floor. They were now lined up against white porcelain walls like red sculptures chiseled from the most varied and fragile material, with the aqueous and iridescent shimmering of silk and the cloudy limpidity of gelatin. At the edge of the open stomach hung the lacework of muscles and heavy necklaces strung with beads of fat. The butchers plunged their red hands inside and pulled out the precious entrails and set them on the table: objects of flesh and blood—round, broad, supple and steaming.

The fresh meat gleamed velvety like the petals of some monstrous hypertrophied roses. The dawn turned steel blue; the cold morning resounded with the deep voice of organ music.

The horses hitched to wagons watched the people through their teary eyes; a mare released a stream of hot urine on the pavement. The sky was mirrored deep and black in puddles, here foamy, there clear.

Everything became distant and desolate. It was morning; people were unloading meat; the wind penetrated through my clothes; I was shivering with cold and lack of sleep; what kind of world was I living in?

I began to run crazily through the streets. The sun rose crimson over the rooftops. In the alleyways of the tall houses darkness still reigned and only at the intersection of streets the light spilled brilliantly as through open doors along abandoned corridors.

I went through the back of the Weber place; the heavy window shutters on the upper floor were closed; all was deserted and sad; the wedding had ended.

The upper floor of the Weber place brightened once Edda came, with shade and coolness, the way a clearing in the deep woods shines more brilliantly through a green light filtered through the leaves.

Edda first covered the windows with drapes and put down soft carpets that muffled all the echoes of the deserted floor.

Every morning I was put on the terrace to inventory the convoluted and artificial objects that came out of the glass cabinets. Together, Ozy and I wiped them conscientiously, only to throw them in a box, or the garbage.

Edda would come and go from the terrace, wearing a blue dressing gown and house slippers whose bottom slapped the ground with each step. Sometimes she would lean against the balustrade.

The floor acquired an ineffable perfume that changed its contents like a strong essence mixed into an alcoholic drink. All the events were fated to appear in my life in this way, suddenly and spasmodically, without my understanding them, isolated in their contours from any past. Edda became one more object, a simple object whose existence tormented and irritated me, like a word repeated innumerable times, that becomes incomprehensible to the extent that its comprehension seems to us more imperiously necessary.

The perfection of the world was ready to transpare from somewhere like a bud that must pass through the last casing to break out into the open air.

In the summer mornings on the floor's terrace, something happened and my whole body strained in vain to understand what it was. I was armed to meet Edda with all the bitterness, all the humility and all the ridiculousness necessary for an affair. The bead curtain between the rooms remained as it was. White linens decorated with large colored bows were put into the glass cabinets, and the Weber place changed completely. A pantomime of four characters began around Edda: Paul became serious and faithful; old Weber bought himself a peaked cap and glasses with a gold frame; Ozy waited, panting with emotion, lest Edda called him upstairs; and I remained on the terrace with a watery gaze that was lost in the void. Every Saturday after-

noon we gathered in the front room where the gramophone played oriental arias from Kismet and Edda served us sweet and lightly bitter cakes made with honey and almonds. Samuel Weber would take some hazelnuts from a fruit bowl and gulp down a handful at intervals so that his Adam's apple bobbed in his throat like a doll suspended on a rubber band. He sat with his legs crossed—the resting position for all other than businessmen and grain merchants—in the way of artists on a theater stage, and when he talked he held his lips together so that no one would see his gold teeth.

He was afraid of putting his hand on the smallest objects, and when he went through the bead curtain, he turned around and carefully brought the two halves together behind him so that they would not make any clinking sounds.

In Ozy all the deformities sharpened and hunched into a position of acute attention. His hump seemed to protrude even more as if constrained to dance attendance on Edda's smallest words and to anticipate them a second in advance.

Only Paul tread on the rugs calmly, sure of himself. His gestures were consummate, to which nothing could be added or subtracted, and when he put his arms around Edda, we were all three quite satisfied that he did it much better than any of us could.

As for me, I don't really know what was happening in those days.

On one of these afternoons, sitting wedged in an armchair, I pressed my head hard into the plush. The small bristles of the velour pricked my cheek and produced a rather sharp pain. Instantly, an imperious desire for heroism grew in me, ridiculous and superb, the way the most diverse and absurd thoughts can spring forth only on a Saturday afternoon out of the boredom of the gramophone music.

I buried my head more and more forcefully into the plush, and as the pain became more violent, the patience to endure it grew more tenacious.

Maybe there are other hungers and other thirsts in us than the organic ones, and something in me needed to be slaked with a simple and acute pain. More and more forcefully I pressed my cheek and rubbed it against the sharp hairs, inflicting a suffering that was beginning to rend me in two.

All at once, Edda stood stupefied with a gramophone record in her hand, looking at me. I was terribly embarrassed by the silence that fell around me. "What's wrong with him?" asked Edda. I saw myself in the mirror. I was ridiculous, perfectly ridiculous: here and there a drop of blood oozed out from the purple spot on my cheek.

With eyes wide open, cheek bleeding, looking at myself in the mirror, I could not, nevertheless, help noticing that allegorically I looked like something on the cover of a novel that was popular then, which showed a Russian czar, bloody, with his hand held to his jaw, following an attempt on his life.

What agonized me now more than the pain in my cheek was the miserable destiny of my heroism, which had ended by my acting out, in flesh and blood, an episode from *The Mysteries of the Court of Petrograd*.

Edda dipped a handkerchief in alcohol and wiped my cheek. I closed my eyes from the sting. My skin started burning there like it was on fire.

I went downstairs dazed, and the avid streets received me once again into their dust and monotony.

The summer had swelled the park, the trees and air chaotically, as in a madman's drawing.

All its vast blazing breath grew monstrously into lush overflowing greenery.

The park had poured itself out like lava; stones burned; my hands were red and heavy.

In the soft and warm deserted places, I paraded in my mind the image of Edda, sometimes multiplied many times over, by tens, a hundred, a thousand Eddas, one next to the other in the heat of the summer—statuesque, identical and obsessive.

There was in all this a terrible and lucid desperation, dispersed in everything I saw and felt. Parallel to my simple and elementary life, other intimacies flourished in me—warm, beloved and secret, like an awful and fantastic internal leprosy.

I composed the details of the imaginary scenes with the most meticulous exactitude. I saw myself in a hotel room, with Edda lying next to me, while the light of the setting sun came in through the window through the thick curtains, with their delicate shadow sketched like cells on her sleeping face. I saw the pattern of the rug next to the bed on which her shoes lay and on the table her open purse with a corner of her handkerchief peeping forth. The dresser with the mirror that reflected part of the bed and the painting of flowers on the walls...

I was left with a rather bitter taste from all these imaginings...

In the park, I would follow women whom I did not know, walking behind them, step for step, until they returned to their houses where I would stand in front of closed doors—devastated, desperate.

One evening I accompanied a woman up to her doorstep.

The house had a garden in front that was lit feebly by an electric bulb.

With sudden elan, unsuspected in me, I opened the gate and followed the woman stealthily into the yard. Meanwhile she entered the house without observing me and I remained alone in the middle of the path leading up to the house. A strange idea passed through my head...

There was a flowerbed in the middle of the garden. In an instant I was in the center of it, and kneeling with my hand to my heart, head uncovered, I assumed a position of prayer. Here's what I wanted: to remain thus for as long as possible, immobile, petrified in the middle of the flowerbed. For a long time I had been tormented by this longing to commit an absurd act in a completely foreign place, and now it had come to me spontaneously, without effort, almost like a joy. The warm evening hummed around me, and in the first moments I felt an enormous gratitude to myself for the courage of having made this decision.

I told myself to remain completely motionless even if no one chased me away and I had to stay like that until the next morning. Gradually my legs and hands stiffened and my position acquired an interior shell of infinite calm and immobility.

How long did I stay like that? All of a sudden I heard vociferations inside the house and the outdoor light went off.

In the dark I was better able to feel the night breeze and the isolation in which I found myself, in the garden of a stranger's home.

A few minutes later the light came back on and then went off again. Someone in the house was turning the light on and off to see what effect this would have on me.

I continued to remain motionless, resolved to face more serious trials than the game with the lights. I kept my hand over my heart and my knee planted on the ground.

The door opened and someone came out into the little garden while a deep voice shouted from the house: "Leave him alone, let him be, he'll go away by himself." The woman that I had followed came over to me. She was now in a dressing gown, with her hair undone and wearing slippers. She looked into my eyes and didn't say anything for a few seconds. We both remained silent. Finally, she put her hand on my shoulder and said gently "Come... it's over now," as if she wanted me to understand that she had understood my gesture and had remained silent for some time in order to allow it to play itself out in its own way.

This spontaneous understanding disarmed me. I got up and wiped the dirt from my pants. “Your legs aren’t hurting you?” she asked... “I wouldn’t have been able to stay motionless for so long...” I wanted to say something but couldn’t manage anything other than to murmur “Good evening” and left hurriedly.

Within me all my desperation cried out again painfully.

I was a tall, thin pale boy with a skinny neck that stuck out from the too loose collar of my tunic. My long hands hung below my cuffs like freshly skinned animals. My pockets were bursting with papers and objects. Only with difficulty was I able to find a handkerchief at the bottom to wipe the dust off my boots when I arrived "downtown."

The simple and elementary things of life evolved around me. A pig would scratch itself against a fence and I would stop to watch it for some minutes. Nothing surpassed in perfection the scraping of coarse hair on wood; I found in it something immensely satisfying and a soothing assurance that the world continued to exist...

I also spent a lot of time in a woodcarving workshop on the outskirts of town.

There were thousands of white and smooth objects amidst the fat wood shavings that fell from the plane and that filled the shop with their rigid foam, smelling of resin.

The piece of wood under the tool became more refined, paler, and its delicate veins appeared more limpid and finely traced, as under a woman's skin.

Nearby, wooden balls lay on a table, calm and heavy, filling my hand with a smooth, ineffable weight, in contact with the entire skin surface.

There were also the chess pieces imbued with the scent of fresh wood stain and entire walls covered with flowers and angels.

In this way some sublime eczema emerged from the material sometimes with lacey, painted or carved pus formations.

In winter hoarfrost pullulated from the cold, in the spindle shapes of weighted water, and in summer flowers burst forth in a thousand small explosions, with red, blue, orange-petalled flames.

Throughout the year, the master carver, whose glasses were missing a lens, extracted from the wood wreaths of smoke and Indian arrows, shells and ferns, peacock feathers and human ears.

In vain did I follow the slow work to surprise the moment when the jagged and moist piece of wood expired into a lignified rose.

In vain did I myself try to perform the wonder by degrees. Unmistakably, I had in my hand uncut fir, bristly and hard but then suddenly, something slippery would come out from under the plane, like a swoon.

Perhaps at the instant when I began to plane the board, a deep sleep overcame me and extraordinary powers grew like tentacles in the air, entering the wood and producing the cataclysm.

Perhaps everyone stopped at those moments and no one was aware of the time that lapsed. Surely, it was in this profound sleep that the master craftsman carved the lilies on the walls and all the violins with their snail-like scrolls.

When I awoke, the board showed me its age lines, like the lines of fate on an extended palm.

I picked up one object after another and their diversity dazed me. In vain did I take a wooden ball in my hand, slide my fingers over it slowly, press it to my cheek, spin it and set it rolling... In vain... in vain... there was nothing to understand.

Hard, unmoving matter surrounded me on all sides—here in the form of wooden balls and carvings—in the street in the form of trees, houses, and stones; immense and futile, enclosing me from head to toe. Whichever way I directed my thoughts, matter surrounded me, beginning with my clothes to the springs in the forests, passing through walls, through trees, stones, glass.

In every corner the lava of matter had emerged from the earth, petrifying in the empty air in the form of houses with windows, trees with branches that rose up to prick the void, flowers that softly and vividly filled the small curved volumes of space, churches with cupolas rising higher and higher up to the thin cross at the top where matter had trickled off, incapable of climbing higher.

Everywhere matter had infested the air, erupting and filling it with the encysted abscesses of stones, with the wounded hollows of trees...

I wandered around deranged by the things that I saw and from which, for me, there was no escape.

Sometimes though I would find an isolated place to allow my head to rest. There, for a moment, all the vertigos would cease and I would feel better.

Once I found such a refuge in the strangest and the most unlikely place in town.

It was indeed so strange that I would not have imagined that it could make such a delightful den of solitude.

I think it was only that burning thirst to fill the emptiness of my days, anywhere and in any way that pushed me into this new adventure.

One day, passing in front of the variety theater in town, I plucked up my courage and went inside.

It was a peaceful and bright afternoon. I crossed a dirty yard with a number of closed doors—at the back I found one that was open leading to a stairway.

In the entryway, a woman was washing clothes. The corridor smelled of lye. I climbed the steps and the woman didn't say anything to me at the beginning, then when I was halfway up the stairs, she turned her head in my direction and mumbled more to herself: "Aha! ...You came!..." no doubt confusing me with someone she knew.

When I remembered this detail long after the incident, the woman's words no longer seemed so simple: perhaps there was a message in them, the announcement of a fatality, which was going to preside over my struggles and which showed me, through the mouth of the washerwoman, that the locations of my adventures were fixed beforehand and that I was fated to fall into them as into some well-laid traps. "Aha! You came!" said the voice of destiny. "You came because you had to, because you couldn't escape..."

I reached a long corridor, which was heated powerfully by the sun that came in through all the windows facing the yard.

The doors of the rooms were closed; no sound could be heard anywhere. In a corner a faucet dripped continuously. It was hot and desolate in the corridor and the drain slowly sucked in each drop of water as if it were sipping a drink that was too cold.

In the back, a door opened into a garret where I found laundry hanging on a line. I crossed the garret and found myself in a small hallway of clean little rooms that had been freshly whitewashed. Each of the rooms had a trunk and a mirror; they must have been dressing rooms for the performers of the variety theater.

There was a stairway to one side, which I used to go down to the theater stage below.

And thus I suddenly wound up on an empty stage in front of the deserted hall. My steps had a weird resonance. All the chairs and tables were set up as for a performance. I found myself alone in front of them on stage in the

middle of a forest scenery.

I wanted to open my mouth, sensing that I should say something out loud, but the silence transfixed me.

All at once I saw the prompt box. I bent down and looked inside.

At first I couldn't distinguish anything, but gradually I made out the dilapidated chairs and old props that filled the basement of the stage.

Moving very cautiously, I climbed into the prompt box and descended.

There was a thick layer of dust over everything. Stars and crowns made of gilded cardboard lay in a corner, which had surely been used for a fairy. In another corner a piece of furniture in rococo style, a table and some chairs with broken legs. In the middle, an impressive armchair, something like a royal throne.

I sank into the chair exhausted. Finally, I was in a neutral place where no one could find me. I rested my hands on the gilded arms of the chair and abandoned myself to the most delightful feeling of solitude.

The darkness around me dissipated somewhat; daylight came in dirty and dusty through a few double windows. I was far from the world, far from the hot and exasperating streets, in a cool and secret cell, in the depths of the earth. Silence hung in the stale, musty air.

Who could have suspected where I was? It was the most curious place in town, and I felt a calm joy in finding myself there.

Around me lay rickety armchairs, beams covered in dust, and other abandoned objects: it was the meeting place of all my dreams.

I stayed there for several hours quietly, in a state of perfect beatitude.

At last I left my hiding place retracing my steps. Odd thing: I didn't meet anyone that time either.

The corridor seemed ablaze with the flames of the setting sun. The drain continued to suck in the water, taking small sips at regular intervals.

In the street, for an instant, I had the impression that none of this had happened. My pants, however, were covered with dust and I left it like that, without wiping it off, as ready proof of the distant and wonderful intimacy that I had experienced under the stage.

The following day, at the same time in the afternoon, I was suddenly seized by a longing for the isolated basement.

I was almost certain that this time I would run into someone, either in the corridor or in the performance hall. For a while I tried to resist the temptation to go there again. I was too tired though, too feverish from

the heat of the day for the possibility of a risk to frighten me. Whatever happened, I had to go back under the stage.

I went in through the same door in the yard and went up the same stairs. The corridor was deserted as ever and I didn't see anyone in the garret or in the hall below.

A few minutes later I was again seated in my place, in the theatric armchair, in my delicious solitude. My heart beat powerfully; I was overwhelmed by the extraordinary success of my escapade.

I began to caress the arms of the chair ecstatically. I wanted the situation in which I found myself to penetrate me as deeply as possible, to weigh in me as heavily as possible, to go through each fiber of my body so that I felt its verisimilitude.

Again I remained there for a long time and left without meeting anyone...

I began to come regularly, every afternoon, under the stage.

As if it were perfectly normal, the corridors were always empty. I fell into the armchair crushed by beatitude. The same cool blue light of the cellar came in through the dirty windows. The same secret atmosphere of perfect solitude reigned, a solitude that I could never tire of.

These daily excursions to the basement of the theater ended one afternoon as strangely as they had begun.

When I came out of the garret at dusk, a woman was getting water from the faucet in the corridor.

I passed by her slowly, at the risk of her asking me what I was doing there. She continued what she was doing, however, with that air of indifference and defensiveness that women assume when they imagine that a stranger wants to talk to them.

At the top of the stairs I stopped, wishing now to talk to her. There was on one side my hesitation and on the other the sullen certitude of the woman that I would talk to her. The sound of water running from the faucet divided the cold silence into two quite distinct domains.

I went back and approached her. It occurred to me to ask her whether she knew any person who would pose for me as a model for some drawings. I said the word "person" with an air of perfect detachment so that she wouldn't see in it some lascivious desire to behold a naked woman, but only my pure, artistic and abstract preoccupation with drawing.

A few days before, a student had told me, to impress me no doubt, that in Bucharest he would invite young girls over to his place under the pretext

of drawing them and afterwards he would sleep with them. I was sure that there wasn't any truth in it, and I somehow sensed in the student's story the clumsiness of an escapade heard from someone and retold as one's own. Still, it had left a strong impression in my mind, and now a wonderful opportunity arose to make use of it. In this way the exploits of a distant stranger, after having passed through the infertile terrain of another, had become yet again mature enough to fall back into reality.

The woman didn't understand, or pretended not to, though I was trying to explain the matter as clearly as possible.

While we were talking, a door opened and another woman came out.

The two of them conferred in whispers.

"Well, let's take him to Elvira's then, she has nothing to do," said one.

They led me toward a low and dark little room that I had not noticed, next to the garret. Inside, instead of a window, there were two openings in the wall that let in a cold draft. It was the projection booth from which films were projected into the garden of the variety theater in the summer. On the ground there were traces of the cement pedestal on which the projector had sat.

In a corner a sick woman lay in bed covered up to her mouth, her teeth chattering. The other women left leaving me alone in the middle of the room.

I approached the bed. The woman withdrew a hand from under the blanket and held it out to me. It was a long, delicate hand that seemed half frozen. I said in a few words that there had been some confusion, that I was brought there by mistake. I stammered out some excuses, explaining vaguely what it was about: some drawings for an art contest with the help of a model.

She only retained the word "help" from all that I had said and responded in a feeble voice:

"... fine... fine... I'll help you... when I get better... now I don't have anything..."

She had understood that I needed some pecuniary help. I gave up attempting any other explanation and stood embarrassed for a few moments, not knowing how to extricate myself.

In the meantime, she began to lament in a very natural tone of voice, as if she wanted to apologize for not giving me anything.

"You see, I have ice on my belly... I'm hot... I'm hot... I feel so bad..."

I left, terribly saddened, and never came back to the variety theater.

Autumn came with its red sun and misty mornings. Hovels, crammed together in the light, smelled freshly of lime. There were washed-out days with skies clouded over like dirty sheets. Rain beat down relentlessly over the deserted park. The gray curtain of water churned through the walkways as in a great empty hall. I sloshed through the wet grass and water streamed down my hair and over my hands.

In the dirty and narrow little lanes of the outskirts, when the rain stopped, the doors opened and the houses breathed in air. Theirs were humble interiors with their coarsely lathed cupboards, their bouquets of artificial flowers arranged on top of dressers, their bronzed plaster statuettes, and their photographs from America. Lives I knew nothing about, lost in the slightly musty spaces of the rooms with low ceilings, sublime in their resigned indifference.

I would have liked to live in those houses, to be permeated by their intimacy, letting all my reveries, all my bitterness dissolve in that interior atmosphere as in a strong acid.

What I wouldn't have given to be able to enter such and such room, treading through it familiarly and flopping down exhausted on an old couch, among flowery chintz pillows. To acquire another intimacy there, to breathe another air and myself to become another person entirely... Stretched out on the couch to contemplate this street where I was now walking, from inside the house, from behind the curtains (and I tried to imagine as precisely as possible the view of the street through the open door as seen from the couch), to suddenly be able to find in myself memories of experiences I never had, unknown memories of life, a life I carried with me forever and ever, memories belonging to the intimacy of the bronzed statuettes and the old lamp globe with the blue and purple butterflies.

How good I would have felt within those cheap and indifferent surroundings that knew nothing of me...

In front of me the squalid little road spread its muddy batter. There

were houses that unfolded like fans, others white like blocks of sugar and still others small with the roof pulled over their eyes, clenching their jaws like prizefighters. I came across hay carts, or all at once some extraordinary thing: a man carrying a crystal chandelier on his back through the rain, the glass pendants tinkling like sleigh bells against his shoulders, while the heavy drops of rain streamed over the glittering facets. What did the gravity of the world consist of after all?

In the public garden, the rain washed the withered flowers and plants. And autumn kindled copper, red, livid blazes like flames that burn more brightly before going out. In the marketplace water and mud flowed in rivulets from huge piles of vegetables. Cuts in the beets suddenly bloomed with the red and dark blood of the earth. A little further lay the good docile potatoes next to heaps of swelled cabbage heads. In a corner rose a mound of squash of exasperating beauty, distended and hideous, bursting through their skin, from the plenitude of the sun imbibed all summer long.

In the middle of the sky, clouds grouped together and then unraveled, leaving rarefied spaces between them, like corridors vanishing into infinity, and later immense rifts that revealed better than anything the heartrending void that always hung above the town.

At those times, the rain fell from afar, from a limitless sky. I liked the changed color of the wet firewood and the rusty grating streaming with water in front of the well-mannered domestic gardens, through which the wind passed, combining with the torrent, like an immense horse mane.

Sometimes I wanted to be a dog, to look at the wet world from the oblique perspective of animals, from bottom to top, head tilted. To range closer to the earth, eyes fixed on the ground, tightly bound to the dark blue of mud.

The wish that had been lying dormant in me for a long time tumbled forth frenetically on that fall day on the field...

On that day, my rambling had led me to the edge of town to the field where the cattle market was held.

The vacant lot stretched in front of me soaked by the rain like a great sea of mud. The manure exuded an acidic odor of urine. The sun was setting in a ragged display of gold and purple. The warm and soft mud stretched in front of me into the distance. What else could suffuse my heart with such joy but this pure and sublime mass of filth?

At first I hesitated. The last traces of my upbringing fought within me with the force of moribund gladiators. But the next instant, they sunk into

a black, opaque night and I was lost to myself.

I went into the mud, first with one foot, then the other. My boots slid pleasantly in the elastic and sticky dough. I was now risen from this substance, one with the mud, sprung from the earth.

Now it was certain that the trees were also nothing other than coagulated mud, issued from the earth's crust. Their color said as much. Only the trees? What about the houses, and the people? Especially the people. All the people. Of course, it wasn't like the stupid saying "all come from dust, and to dust all return." This was too vague, too abstract, too insubstantial when confronted with the field of mud. People and things had sprung from just this manure and urine in which I myself stuck some very concrete boots.

In vain people covered themselves in their white silky skin and dressed themselves in clothes of fabric. In vain, in vain... The implacable, imperious and elemental mud lay within them; the warm, rich, stinking mud. The boredom and stupidity with which they filled their lives showed this well enough.

I myself was a special creation of the mud; a missionary sent by it into this world. I sensed clearly in those moments how the memory of it came back to me and I remembered my nights of writhing and burning darkness, when my essential mud ventured forth uselessly and strived to break through the surface. I would then close my eyes and it would continue to boil in obscurity babbling unintelligibly.

The field stretched out around me, full of mud... This was my authentic flesh, clothes flayed, skin flayed, muscles flayed, flayed to the mud core.

Its elastic moisture and its raw odor received me into its very depths because I belonged to them to the very depths. A few outward features, purely accidental, for instance, the few gestures that I was capable of making, the fine thin hair on my head or my glassy and moist eyes separated me from the immobility and antiquity of the filth. It was little, too little in the face of the immense majesty of the slime.

I walked in all directions. My feet sunk into the mud up to my ankles. The rain stopped and in the distance the sun went down behind the curtain of bloody and purulent clouds.

Suddenly I bent down and put my hands in the manure. Why not? Why not? I felt like screaming.

The mud batter was lukewarm and mild: My hands went through it easily. When I clenched my fist, the mud came out between my fingers in beautiful globs, black and shiny.

What had my hands been doing until then? How had they squandered their time? I walked them here and there in the mud to their heart's content. What had they been until then but poor imprisoned birds, bound by a terrible chain of skin and shoulder muscles? Poor birds destined to fly through a few stupid decorous gestures, learned and rehearsed as if they were something remarkable.

Little by little they reverted to their wild nature and rejoiced in their old freedom. Now they rolled their heads in the manure, cooed like doves, beat their wings, happy... so happy...

With joy I began to flap them about over my head, making them fly. Big globs of mud fell on my face and clothes.

Why should I have wiped them off? What for? It was only the beginning; no grave consequences followed my act, no trembling of the sky, no shaking of the earth. Immediately, I passed a hand covered with mud over my face. An immense gaiety seized me; I had not felt so cheerful in a long time. I raised both hands to my face and my throat then rubbed my hair with them.

Suddenly, the rain started to fall more thickly in fine droplets. The sun continued to illuminate the field like a huge lamp at the back of a hall of gray marble. It rained in the sunlight, golden rain, smelling of fresh laundry.

The field was deserted. Here and there lay heaps of dried cornstalk on which the cattle had fed. I took a stalk and peeled it carefully. I was shivering with cold, and with my hands covered in mud, I had trouble husking the corn. It was interesting though. There was a lot to see in a dried cornstalk. In the distance I spied a hut covered with thatch. I ran to it and went under the eaves. The roof was so low my head rubbed against it. The ground next to the wall was perfectly dry. I stretched out on the ground. I rested my head on some old sacks, put one leg over the other; I could now abandon myself to the minute analysis of the cornstalk.

I was happy that I could occupy myself with this fascinating investigation. The canals and hollows of the cornstalk filled me with enthusiasm. I pulled them apart with my teeth and found the soft, sweetish fuzz inside. This lining was wonderful for a cornstalk; if people also had arteries lined with soft fuzz, no doubt the darkness within them would have been milder, easier to bear.

I looked at the cornstalk and the silence within me laughed softly as if someone were continuously blowing soap bubbles.

It rained while the sun shone and far off in the fog the town smoked like a heap of rubbish. Some roofs and church towers gleamed strangely in this wet

twilight. I was so happy that I didn't know what absurd action to perform next: to analyze the cornstalk, to stretch my limbs or to watch the town in the distance.

A little beyond my feet, where the mud began, a little frog suddenly gave a few hops. At first it came closer to me but then immediately changed its mind and made for the field. "Farewell, little frog!" I called after him. "Farewell! You're breaking my heart leaving me so quickly... Farewell, my lovely!..." I began to improvise a long tirade addressed to the little frog and when I finished speaking I threw the cornstalk after it, on the chance that I'd hit it...

Later, gazing at the beams above me, I closed my eyes in fatigue and fell asleep.

A profound sleep enveloped me and penetrated me to the marrow.

I dreamt that I was in the streets of a city full of dust, with lots of sun and with white houses, perhaps an oriental city. I was walking alongside a woman in black, who was wearing a large mourning veil. Strangely, the woman had no head. The veil was neatly arranged where the head was supposed to be, but in place of the head there was only a gaping hole, an empty sphere down to the nape.

We were both in a hurry, and walking side by side, we followed a cart marked with red crosses that carried the corpse of the husband of the lady in black.

I understood that we were in a time of war. Indeed, we soon arrived at a station and descended the stairs into a basement poorly lit by electricity. Just then a convoy of wounded men arrived, and the nurses, all aflutter, bustled about on the platform with baskets of cherries and pretzels, which they distributed among the invalids on the train.

Suddenly, a well-dressed portly gentleman, with a decoration in his buttonhole, got off from one of the first class compartments.

He wore a monocle and white boots. His baldness was concealed under a few strands of silvery hair. He was holding a white Pekingese puppy, with eyes like two agate marbles floating in oil.

For a few seconds he walked up and down the platform looking for something. He finally found it: it was the flower girl. He chose several bunches of red carnations from the basket and paid for them, taking the money from a supple elegant wallet monogrammed in silver.

Then he boarded the train again and through the window I saw how he placed the puppy on the little table near the window and fed the animal the

red carnations, one after another, which the puppy gobbled up with obvious relish...

I was awakened by a terrible shivering.

It was raining hard now. The raindrops were pelting down right next to me and I had to press myself against the wall. The sky had turned black and the town could no longer be seen in the distance.

I was cold but my face was burning. I felt their heat under the crust of caked mud. I wanted to get up but a bolt of electricity shot through my legs. They were completely numb and I had to slowly unfold them in turn. My socks were cold and wet.

I thought of sheltering myself inside the hut, but the door was locked and as for a window, there was only an opening that was boarded up. The wind scattered the rain every which way and I couldn't get away from it anywhere.

Night began to fall. In no time the field was sunk in darkness. Just on the other side, in the direction I had come from, a tavern turned on its lights.

I was there in an instant; I wanted to go in, to drink something, to sit in the heat among the people and the fumes of alcohol. I rummaged in my pocket but didn't find a cent. In front of the tavern the rain fell cheerfully through a curtain of fetid smoke and steam that wafted out from inside.

I had to decide something—for instance, do I go home? But how?

In the filthy state I was in, I couldn't. Nor did I want to give up the filth.

Inexpressible bitterness descended into my soul as when someone sees before him that there is absolutely nothing left to do, nothing left to accomplish.

I started to run through the streets in the dark, jumping over pools of water and stepping into some up to my knees.

Despair engulfed me for a moment as if I had to scream and beat my head against the trees. But immediately all my sadness shrank back in the face of a calm and gentle thought. I knew now what I had to do: since it couldn't continue, it only remained for me to put an end to it all. What was I leaving behind? A wet ugly world in which rain fell slowly...

I entered the house through the back door. I crept through the rooms avoiding myself in the mirrors. I was looking for something quick and efficient that would overturn in the darkness, all that I saw and felt, at one stroke, the way a cart full of stones is emptied when you pull out the board in the back.

I started to hunt through the drawers for a violent poison. While I was rummaging, I didn't think about anything; I had to finish as quickly as possible. It was as if I had to complete a task like any other.

I found all kinds of objects that were completely useless to me: buttons, strings, colored threads, booklets, all smelling strongly of mothballs. So many things that could not bring about the death of a man. Here's what the world contained at the most tragic moments: buttons, threads, and strings...

At the bottom of a drawer I came across a box of white tablets. They could have been poison as well as some innocuous medicine. It occurred to me though that, whatever may be the case, taken in large quantities, they had to be poisonous.

I put one on my tongue. A slightly salty and vapid taste spread through my mouth. I crushed it between my teeth and the resulting powder absorbed all the saliva. My mouth grew parched.

There were many tablets in the box, over thirty. I went to the faucet in the yard and slowly, patiently, I set about swallowing them all.

For each tablet I drank a mouthful of water, so it took me a long time to finish the box. The last ones would not go down: it was as if my throat had swollen shut.

In the yard there was complete darkness. I sat down on a step and waited. My stomach started to boil terribly, but beyond that I felt well and the pattering of rain now seemed inexpressibly intimate. It seemed to understand my state and penetrated me deeply to restore me.

The yard became a kind of parlor and I felt light there, and still lighter. Everything was making a desperate effort not to drown in the obscurity.

Suddenly I realized that I was sweating profusely. I put my hand in my shirt and when I pulled it out it was dripping wet. Around me the void grew vertiginously. When I went back in and fell into bed, I was completely bathed in sweat.

It was a beautiful head, extraordinarily beautiful.

About three times as big as a human head, rotating slowly around a brass axis that went through it from crown to neck.

At first I only saw the nape. What material could it be made of? It had the dull luster of old faience with ivory tints. The entire surface was engraved with small blue designs, a kind of filigree that repeated itself geometrically, like the designs on linoleum. From afar it looked like small fine writing on ivory paper, unimaginably beautiful.

As soon as the head began to move, rotating on its axis, I was overcome by deep vertigo. I knew that in a few seconds the other side of the skull would appear—the horrifying, terrible visage.

It was a well-formed face, with all the normal human contours: deep-set eyes, a very prominent chin and triangular hollows under each cheekbone like those of a thin man.

The skin, however, was fantastical: made up of delicate strips of thin flesh, arranged next to each other, like the coffee-colored sheets on the underside of mushrooms.

There were so many sheets and they were so close together that if you looked at the head and squinted a little, you couldn't see anything abnormal, and the miniscule lines resembled the hatched shadows of a copper engraving.

Sometimes in the summer, from afar, chestnut trees loaded with leaves looked like enormous heads stuck on trunks, with deeply hollowed cheeks, just like the lamellas of my head.

When the wind blew through the leaves, these faces undulated like a wheat field.

The head rippled in the same way when the pedestal tottered.

In order to know that the face was made of sheets, it was enough to stick my finger into the flesh a tiny bit. The finger went in without resistance like into a soft and moist paste. When I took it out, the sheets went back into place and there was no trace of the disturbance.

Once, in my childhood, I attended an exhumation and a reinhumation of a corpse.

The deceased was a girl who had died young and who had been buried in her bridal veils.

The silk bodice had come apart in long dirty strips, and here and there traces of the embroidery were mixed in with the earth. The face appeared intact, however, and almost all of the features had been preserved. The livid color of the face made the head appear to have been modeled from pasteboard soaked in water.

When the coffin was taken out and opened, someone passed a hand over the face of the dead girl. It was then that all of us who were watching received a terrible shock: what we had believed was a well-preserved face was only a thick layer of mold, about two fingers deep. The mold had completely replaced the face of flesh, down to the bone, preserving its form. There was only a bare skeleton underneath.

That's how my head was; with the only difference being that in place of the mold, it was covered with sheets of flesh. With my finger though, I could reach between them to the bone.

The head, though hideous, was a sure refuge against the air.

Why against the air? In the room the air was always in motion, viscous, heavy, fluid, trying to congeal into ugly black stalactites.

The head appeared in this air for the first time and around it a void formed like an aureole that kept growing.

I was so pleased and happy about its appearing that I felt like laughing. But how could I laugh in bed, at night, in the dark?

I began to love the head insatiably. It was the most precious and intimate thing that I possessed. It came from the world of darkness from where only a tiny buzz reached me, like a continuous simmering in the skull. What other things could be found there? I opened my eyes wide and peered into the darkness in vain. Apart from the ivory head nothing else appeared.

I wondered with some apprehension if this head were not going to become the center of all my preoccupations in life, replacing them all, one by one, such that in the end it would be just me with the darkness and the head. Life, then, seemed to acquire a precise true meaning. For the moment the head had grown in the air like a ripe fruit arrived at maturity.

The head was my rest and my bliss, my personal bliss. Perhaps if it had belonged to the whole world, a terrible catastrophe would have followed. A single moment of utter happiness would have been capable of transfixing the world forever.

The greasy flow of the air, more and more powerless, continued to fight against the head.

Sometimes, my father appeared beside it, but vaguely and indistinctly

like a mass of whitish steam. I knew that he was going to put his hand on my forehead; his hand was cold. I tried to explain about the battle between the head and the air as I felt my father undoing my shirt and sliding a thermometer under my arm, like a glass lizard.

An annoying movement started around the head, like a flag flapping.

Impossible to stop; the flag kept fluttering.

I remembered that day, at teatime, on the upper floor of the Weber place; Paul had let his hand hang down by his chair, and Edda, from the bed, raising her shoe a little, had started to tease his palm in fun. This gesture had acquired an unusual virulence with time. When I was remembering it, the shoe started to scratch Paul's hand frenetically until it formed a small wound, then a hole in the flesh. The shoe didn't stop its chafing action for a moment: it kept digging and digging into the palm with the hole, then the whole arm, and then the whole body...

That's how the movement of the flag started in the room. It was in danger of putting a hole into everything, of devouring me, maybe...

I shouted in desperation, drenched in sweat.

"How high?" asked a voice from the shadows.

"39," my father answered and left, leaving me prey to the growing tempest.

Convalescence announced itself one morning as an extreme fragility of light. In the room where I slept, it came through a sheet of frosted glass set into the ceiling. Strangely, the volume of the room lost density. The clarity of things weighed less, and however deeply I breathed, there still remained a vast emptiness as if an important quantity of my substance had disappeared.

Under the hot sheets, crumbs slid around under my legs. My foot sought out the iron bedstead and the iron stabbed it like a knife of coldness.

I tried getting out of bed. Everything was as I suspected: the air was too insubstantial to sustain me. I stepped into it disjointedly as if I were crossing a warm and vaporous river.

I sat down on a chair under the window in the ceiling. The light chased away the exactitude of things around me as if it were washing them thoroughly to take the luster from them.

The bed, in its corner, lay sunk in darkness. How had I managed, in the dark, with a fever, to distinguish each grain of lime on the wall?

I started to get dressed slowly; the clothes also weighed less than usual. They hung from my body like strips of blotting paper and smelled like lye from the clothes iron.

Floating through increasingly rarefied water, I came out on the streets. The sun immediately made me dizzy. Immense patches of brilliant yellow and greenish light partially covered the houses and passers-by. The street itself seemed weak and fresh as if it had also come out of the fever of a grave illness.

The gray carriage horses with their swayed backs walked abnormally. Now they were stepping slowly and sluggishly, stumbling—now they were bolting, breathing hard through the nostrils so as not to fall from weakness in the middle of the asphalt.

The long corridor of houses shook lightly in the wind. The strong smell of fall came from afar. “A beautiful fall day!” I said to myself. “A splendid fall day!...”

I walked very slowly along the dusty houses. In the window of a bookstore I spotted a mechanical toy stirring.

It was a small red and blue clown that was clapping two tiny brass cymbals together. He was ensconced in his room, in the shop window, among books, balls, and ink pots and clapping the cymbals together, lightheartedly and cheerfully.

Tears of emotion came to my eyes . It was so clean, so cool and so beautiful in that corner in the window!

Indeed, it was the ideal place in the world to stand quietly and clap the cymbals, dressed in beautiful and colorful clothes.

After so much fever, here was something clear and simple. The autumn light fell more intimately, more pleasantly in the window. How good it would have been to change places with the merry little clown! Between books and balls, surrounded by clean objects, seated neatly on a sheet of blue paper. Tak! Tak! Tak! How nice it is in the window! Tak! Tak! Tak! Red, green, blue; balls, books and paints. Tak! Tak! Tak! What a beautiful fall day!...

Slowly, imperceptibly, the movements of the clown began to subside. First the cymbals stopped touching, then suddenly the clown was sitting with his arms frozen in the air.

I realized almost with horror that the clown had stopped playing. Something in me hardened painfully. A beautiful and merry moment had frozen in the air.

I left the window quickly and took off toward a small public garden in the center of town.

The chestnut trees had cast off their yellowed leaves. The old restaurant made of planking was closed and in front, a bunch of broken-down benches lay in disarray.

I somehow settled myself into a carved-up bench in such a way that I woke up almost lying on my back looking up at the sky. The sun sent a fragmented light full of crystals between the branches.

I stayed like that for some time, my gaze lost in the heights, and weakened, inexpressibly weakened.

Suddenly a strapping boy sat down next to me, with the sleeves of his shirt turned up, with a powerful red neck and large dirty hands. He scratched his head for a few seconds with all his ten fingers, then took out a book from the pocket of his pants and began to read.

He held the pages of the book tightly in his hand so that the wind wouldn't leaf through them and read mumbling out loud; from time to time he passed

a hand through his hair as though he would understand better.

I coughed significantly and questioned him. "What are you reading?" I asked, lying flat on the bench, looking up into the branches of the trees.

The boy put the book in my hand as if I were blind. It was a long tale in verse about outlaws, an oily book, covered with grease stains and dirt; it had obviously passed through many hands. While I was looking at it, he stood up and remained in front of me, powerful, sure of himself, with his sleeves rolled up, his neck bared.

Something just as pleasant and tranquil as hitting the cymbals together in a store window.

"And... doesn't your head ache when you read?..." I asked, giving the book back.

He didn't seem to understand.

"Why should my head ache? It doesn't ache at all," he said and sat back down on the bench and went on reading.

So there was a category of things in the world which I was destined never to be a part of: carefree mechanical clowns, strapping boys who never got headaches. Around me, amongst the trees, in the sunlight, flowed a lively and voluminous current, full of life and purity. I was destined to remain forever on the margins, crammed with darkness and fainting weakness.

I stretched my legs on the bench and found a very comfortable position leaning my back against a tree. What was keeping me from being as strong and carefree after all? To feel circulating within me a fresh and vigorous sap, as it circulates through the thousands of branches and leaves of a tree, to hold myself vertical and meaningless in the sunlight, straight, sober, with a life that was certain and well-defined, enclosed within me as in a trap...

For this perhaps I would first have to try to breathe more deeply and at longer intervals: I breathed poorly; my chest was always too full or too empty. I began to breathe the air with confidence. After a few minutes I felt better. A thin fluid of perfection, but which I felt was swelling by the moment, began to flow through my veins. The noise of the streets reminded me distantly of the town, but now the town turned very slowly around me like a gramophone record. I had become something like the center and axis of the world. The essential thing was not to lose my balance.

Once at a circus, in the morning, when the performers were rehearsing, I witnessed a scene that now came back to me... An amateur from the audience, a simple spectator without any prior training, without hesitation and with much courage, climbed up on the pyramid of chairs and tables that

the circus acrobat had just climbed a little before. Along with everyone else I admired the precision with which he scaled the perilous structure, and the frenzy of having succeeded in overcoming the first obstacles intoxicated the amateur with a kind of unconscious knowledge of balancing, which made him put his hand in exactly the right place, extend his leg with precision and find in himself the minimal weight with which to approach a new rung in the elevation. Giddy and exultant with the sureness of his gestures, he arrived at the top in a few seconds. Here, however, something singular happened to him: he instantly became aware of the fragility of the fulcrum where he found himself, as well as his own extraordinary daring. With his teeth chattering, he asked, in a faint voice, for a ladder and exhorted those below innumerable times to hold it well and to keep it still. The courageous amateur descended with endless precautions, step by step, sweating all over, exasperated and annoyed at having had the idea of climbing the structure.

My position now in the garden was at the top of the shaky pyramid. I felt a new and powerful sap circulating within me, but I had to endeavor not to fall from the height of my wonderful certitude.

It crossed my mind that I should see Edda this way, calm, sure of myself, full of light; I hadn't been over there in a long time. For once at least, I wanted to present myself whole and firm, in front of somebody.

Silent and superb like a tree. That was it—like a tree. I filled my chest with air and stretching out fully on my back, addressed a warm greeting of camaraderie to the branches above me. There was something rough and simple in a tree that was wonderfully akin to my new forces. I caressed the trunk as if I would have slapped the shoulder of a friend. "Tree, old friend!" The more carefully I looked at the infinitely multiplied crown of branches, the more I sensed within me how the flesh divided and how the vital air from outside flowed through its cavities. The blood rose in my veins, majestic and full of sap, frothy with the bubbling of its simple life.

I rose to my feet. For a second, my knees folded uncertainly, as if they wanted to juxtapose all my force and weakness through a single hesitation. Taking long strides, I took off toward Edda's house.

The heavy wooden door that opened onto the terrace was closed. Its immobility threw me a little. All my thoughts, to the very last one, took flight.

I put my hand on the door handle and pushed. "Courage," I said, but stopped to correct myself. "Courage? Only timid men need courage to do something; the normal ones, the strong ones, don't have courage, nor are

they cowardly, they simply open the door, like this..."

The cool darkness of the first room enveloped me with an air full of tranquility and happiness, as if it had been waiting for me for a long time.

This time the bead curtain falling back together behind me had a strange clinking sound, which gave me the feeling that I was alone in a deserted house at the edge of the world. Could that possibly be the feeling of extreme balance at the top of the pyramid of chairs?

I knocked violently on Edda's door.

Startled, she told me to come in.

Why was I stepping so slowly?

"I had stepped slowly?" It seemed to me though, that the presence of a person like me, or better yet, a tree, should make itself felt from afar.

In the room, however, no wonder, no excitement, not the least emotion was aroused.

My thoughts preceded me by a few seconds in idealization, with a great perfection and simplicity of gestures. I saw myself advancing confidently, and with a casual movement, seating myself at Edda's feet on the bed where she lay. My real person, however, remained behind these beautiful projects, like deadwood in tow.

Edda invited me to sit down; I seated myself on a chair at a great distance from her.

The grandfather clock beat out an annoying and sonorous tick-tock between us. A strange thing: the tick-tock grew like the ebb and flow of the sea, advancing in waves toward Edda until I almost stopped hearing it and then coming back amplified toward me to blast my ears violently.

"Edda," I began to speak, interrupting the silence, "allow me to tell you something very simple..."

Edda did not reply.

"Edda, do you know what I am?"

"What?"

"A tree, Edda, a tree..."

The whole of this short conversation, of course, took place in my head and not a single word was uttered in reality.

Edda nestled herself in bed, folding her knees under her, covering them with her peignoir. She then put her hands behind her head and watched me with great interest. I would have gladly given anything for her to find another point in the room to focus her gaze.

Suddenly, I saw a large bouquet of flowers in a vase on a shelf. This saved me.

Why had I not seen them until then? I had been looking over there the whole time since I had come in. In order to verify their apparition, I looked in another part of the room for a second and then looked back. They were still there in the same place—immobile, large, red... Then how had I not seen them? I began to doubt my certainty about the tree. Here was an object that had appeared in the room where there was nothing just a moment before. Was my vision always so clear, I wondered? Perhaps there remained some traces of powerlessness and darkness in my body, which circulated through my new luminosity like some clouds in a brilliant sky, covering my vision when they passed through the humor of the eyes, as clouds suddenly cover the sun and plunge a part of the landscape in shadow.

"How beautiful those flowers are," I said to Edda.

"What flowers?"

"Those over there, on the shelf."

"What flowers?"

"Those beautiful red dahlias..."

"What dahlias?"

"What do you mean... what dahlias?"

I got up and rushed to the shelf. A red scarf lay thrown on a pile of books. The moment I extended my hand and convinced myself that it was indeed a red scarf, something hesitated deep within me like the oscillations of the amateur equilibrist's courage at the top of the pyramid, between acrobatics and dilettantism. I too must have arrived at my pinnacle.

The whole problem could now be summed up as one of returning to my chair and sitting down. And then what was I supposed to do? What was I supposed to say?

For a few moments I was so stupefied by this problem that it was impossible for me to execute even the smallest movement. Like the great speed of motor flywheels, which makes them appear motionless, my profoundly desperate hesitation gave me the rigidity of a statue. The tick-tock of the grandfather clock beat powerfully, holding me fast with small sonorous nails. I wrenched myself out of my immobility with great difficulty.

Edda was in the same position on the bed, watching me with the same calm wonder; one would have said that a malicious power, extremely perfidious, endowed things with the most common aspect in order to put me in the worst predicament. This was what fought against me; this was what was

implacably against me: the common aspect of things.

In such an exact world, any initiative became superfluous if not impossible. What made my blood din in my head was that Edda could not be other than what she was, a woman with well-combed hair, with violet-blue eyes, with a smile at the corner of her lips. What could I do against such a severe exactitude? How could I make her understand, for instance, that I was a tree? I would have had to transmit it with immaterial and formless words, through the air, a crown of branches and leaves, enormous and superb, just as I felt it all inside. How could I have accomplished this?

I approached the bed and leaned against the wooden bar. A kind of certitude radiated through my hands as if the knot of my anxiety had suddenly fallen into them.

And now? There was the same pellucid, impalpable air between Edda and me, outwardly insubstantial, but in which, nevertheless, lay all my forces, which amounted to nothing. Hesitations of tens of kilograms, silences of whole hours, disturbances, vertigos of flesh and blood, all these could enter into that miserable space without there being any sign of the black coloring and the hazy material that it contained. In the world distances were simply not what we saw with our eyes, infinitesimal and permeable, but rather invisible, populated by monsters and timidity, by fantastical projects and mysterious gestures, which, had they for an instant coagulated into the matter from which they tended to be composed, they would have transformed the aspect of the world into a horrendous cataclysm, into an extraordinary chaos, full of dire misfortunes and ecstatic beatitudes.

At that moment, watching Edda, perhaps the materialization of my thoughts would have resulted in the simple gesture that was now whirring in my ear, of lifting the paper weight from the table (I saw out of the corner of my eye that it was a noble medieval helmet holding down the papers) and throwing it at Edda, and as the immediate outcome: a formidable gush of blood from her chest, vigorous as the torrent from a faucet, filling the room gradually with blood until I felt, at first, how the warm and sticky liquid lapped against my feet, then my knees and then—like in those sensational American films where a character is condemned to stay in a hermetically sealed room in which the water rises and rises—to feel suddenly the blood at my mouth and its salty and pleasant taste, to drown...

Involuntarily, I moved my lips and swallowed.

"Are you hungry," asked Edda.

"Oh no, no... I'm not hungry, I was thinking about something... absurd...

totally absurd."

"Please, tell me. You haven't said a word since you came in and I haven't asked you anything... now I'm waiting, as you can see."

"Look, Edda," I began, "it's quite simple... it's as simple as anything... forgive me for saying it, but I..."

I wanted to end with "I am a tree," but this phrase no longer had any value, not since the desire to drink blood came over me. It lay dull and withered at the bottom of my soul, and I was amazed that it ever had any importance.

I began again.

"Here's what it is, Edda, I was feeling ill, I felt weak and wretched. Your presence always does me good, it's enough for me just to see you... are you angry about that?"

"Not at all..." she replied and began to laugh.

Now I really felt like committing something absurd, bloody and violent. I grabbed my hat. "I'm leaving now." In a moment I was at the bottom of the stairs.

It was now a certainty: the world had its common aspect in the middle of which I labored like an error; never will I be able to become a tree, nor kill someone, nor will blood gush forth in waves. All things, all people were enclosed in their sad and small obligation to be exact, nothing other than exact. In vain would I have believed that there were dahlias in a vase when there was only a scarf. The world had no power to change anything, however little; it was so niggardly, enclosed in its exactitude, that it could not even permit itself to take scarves for flowers...

For the first time I felt my head tightly bound up in my skull. Appalling, painful imprisonment...

That autumn Edda got sick and died. All the preceding days, all my aimless walks, all my toil and torturous questionings coalesced into the pain and turbulence of a single week as in those liquids where the mixture of a number of substances condenses suddenly into the violence of a powerful poison.

On the upper floor of the Weber place, silence fell another octave. Paul managed to find in some cabinet an old overcoat and a threadbare tie, knotted about the neck like a noose. He had a purplish color that was like thin gauze deposited on his face from sleepless nights.

"She suffered the entire night," he told me. "Yesterday, I asked the doctor again what he thought and he told me everything, the whole truth. It's as if an explosion had occurred in the kidneys, the doctor declared. It's extremely rare for this disease to appear with such virulence and so abruptly. Usually, it insinuates itself slowly, with symptoms that signal the disease long before it becomes serious. It's a real explosion in the kidneys, a real explosion."

Paul spoke quickly but with long interruptions as if he wanted to allow some time between his words for an acute pain to flare up and die down inside.

In the office below, it had gotten dark as in a cave: old Weber, with his nose in a ledger, gave himself the illusion of being busy...

Every morning the doctor came with muffled steps, passing through the rooms, accompanied by the three Webers.

I would follow them, talking to Ozy. We hadn't played our imaginary game in a long time; it would have been a wonderful occasion to do so.

How good it would have been to speak of Edda's illness as if nothing had happened!

Going up the stairs, I thought of the extraordinary possibility of a game directed by Ozy, in which the doctor, Paul, and old Weber would also take part. For the humpback to really direct an imagined and non-existent scene for once. When we arrived at the top, I felt like crying out: "That's enough now, it's over, well done, Paul had a truly impressive mask, old Weber obvi-

ously looked like he was suffering, but now that's enough, it's finished, please, tell them Ozy, that you're not playing anymore..."

However, everything was too well arranged for it to stop at the top of the stairs.

While the doctor went in to see Edda, we stayed in the next room, old Weber, Ozy and I.

It was the first time in his life, perhaps, that old Weber tried to master a great emotion. With his head leaning back on the armchair he looked out the window, with an impersonal and vague air, as if he didn't know anything and didn't expect anything. In the end, like the great actors who seek to enrich their role by adding some fine original detail, he rose from the armchair and went to look at a picture on the wall more closely. And like the great actor, however, who in excessively deepening his voice for the tragic tirade, transforms it into a ridiculous shouting, meriting the snickers from the gallery, old Weber in trying to play his role, indeed, with too much calm, botched the effect: while he stood and looked at the picture, he drummed his fingers irritably on the back of a chair...

Paul took me by the hand:

"Edda wants to see you, follow me quietly."

Covered in white sheets, Edda lay in bed with her head turned toward the window. Her hair was spread out on the pillow, blonder and finer than ever: sicknesses have such subtleties. A kind of white decomposition of things dominated the room with a frightening amount of light; Edda's face was disappearing in it, insubstantial.

Suddenly she turned her head.

But it was true... That is, at that moment something happened inside of me that was so indistinct, so clear and so surprising that it could have constituted a truth come from the outside... Edda's head resembled the ivory head of my feverish nights in every way. The evidence was so dizzying that I came to believe I had invented just at that moment the exact form of the old head of faience, with that speed of composition in dreams where an entire episode is elaborated at the moment we hear a gunshot.

I was now sure that soon something violent and evil was going to happen to Edda. Perhaps I also imagined this later; with regard to everything that has to do with Edda, I distinguish nothing from what could be me in truth and what was really her.

She tried to look into my eyes, but tired, her eyelids closed. Her hair, fallen to one side, revealed a yellow forehead like a block of wax. Once again

I was hermetically enclosed in Edda's presence, in what she represented now as in my nights of delirium. In none of my walks, in none of my encounters had I ever truly thought of anyone else but myself. It was impossible for me to conceive of another's intimate pain or just simply of another existence. The people I saw around me were just so much decoration, ephemeral and material like any other object, like houses or trees. Only before Edda, for the first time, did I feel that my questionings could escape, resonating in other depths and in another existence, to return to me in enigmatic and disturbing echoes.

Who was Edda? What was Edda? For the first time I saw myself from the outside, because in Edda's presence was the question of the meaning of my life. At the moment of her death she shook me more profoundly and more authentically than ever; her death was my death and since then, in all that I do, in all that I experience, the immobility of my future death projects itself cold and obscure, as I saw it then in Edda's passing.

On that day I woke up at dawn, sluggish and stone-heavy, irritated by a presence near my bed.

It was my father, who had been waiting silently for me to wake. When I opened my eyes, he took a few steps into the room and brought a white basin and a pitcher of water for me to wash my hands.

With a painful convulsion that gripped my heart, I understood what it meant.

"Wash your hands," my father said, "Edda is dead."

It was drizzling outside and the rain didn't stop for three days.

On the day of the burial, the mud was more aggressive and dirtier than ever. The wind beat gusts of water against the roof and the windowpanes. All night long a window of the upper floor of the Weber place remained lit, in the room where the candles were burning.

In old Weber's office everything was in disarray and put to the side to make way for the coffin; the mud insinuated itself into the room triumphantly, like a hydra with innumerable protoplasmic elongations; I saw it spreading over the walls, climbing up on people, ascending the stairs and trying to go up the coffin.

In the office the wood floor appeared when the cerecloth covering it was removed: long creases of dirt surfaced like the black creases that furrowed Samuel Weber's face.

Around his rubber boots the mud climbed slowly but tenaciously, pene-

trating the skin and up into the heart, dirty, heavy, sticky. It was mud and nothing else; it was the floor and nothing else; they were the candles and nothing else. “My funeral will be a procession of objects,” Edda had told me once.

Something in me still struggled somewhere far off, as if I were trying to prove to myself the existence of a truth superior to the mud, something other than the mud. In vain... My identity had been veritable for a long time, and now, in a most ordinary way, it did nothing other than verify itself: nothing existed in the world outside of the mud. What I took for pain was nothing other than a weak seething, a protoplasmic elongation formed into words and rationales.

The drops flowed into Paul as into a bottomless vessel; his clothes flowed down him like water, his hands flowed down, hanging heavily and curving his back. His tears trickled down his dirty face in long streams like rain trickling down a windowpane.

Slowly, balanced on the shoulders of people, the coffin passed by Samuel Weber’s ship, by the old ledgers and the dozens of little bottles of ink and medicines discovered when the office was cleaned. The funeral was a simple procession of objects...

There were a few more details on this side of life: at the cemetery when the corpse was taken out of the coffin, the white sheets in which it was wrapped showed a big splotch of blood.

It was the last and the most insignificant detail before the warm, moldy subsoil of the cemetery, full of soft bodies like gelatin, yellow... purulent...

When I think about these things again and again, trying uselessly to make them cohere into something that I could call "me"; when remembering them, old Weber's office suddenly becomes the room where I breathe mildew and the stale odor of ledgers—at that very moment—only for it to immediately disappear to be replaced by an actual room that puts the same painful problem before me, of the way in which people spend their lives making use of rooms, for example, or feeling like a strange body, ramified like a fern and insubstantial like smoke, suddenly, a particular odor, like the profoundly enigmatic odor of mildew; when events and people open and close within me like fans; when my hand tries to write this strange and uncomprehended simplicity, then it seems to me, for a moment, like to a condemned man who for a second realizes, differently from all the other people around him, the death that awaits him (and would like his struggle to be different from all the other struggles in the world, succeeding in setting him free), that from all these things a new authentic fact, warm and intimate, will emerge suddenly to sum me up clearly like a name and resound in me with a unique never-before-heard tone—that of the meaning of my life...

Why then, if not for this reason, does that fluid persist within me, so intimate yet so hostile, so close yet so rebellious to catchment, that transforms itself of its own accord into a vision of Edda, or Paul Weber's bent shoulders, or the overly precise detail of the water faucet in the corridor of a hotel?

Why does the memory of Edda's last days come back to me so clearly now? Why then, asking in another way (and the questions can grow chaotically in thousands upon thousands of different directions as in that game from childhood where we fold a piece of paper blotted with ink and press hard so that the ink would spread as much as possible, revealing, when we open the paper, the most fantastic and unexpected contortions of a bizarre drawing) why then, asking in yet another way, does this memory come back to me and not another?

With each uncomprehended and exact memory, I must further realize,

like the violent pain of someone ill, which overshadows his minor momentary discomforts like the uncomfortable position of a pillow, or the bitterness of a medicine—like a pain then, that envelopes and encompasses all my other incomprehensions and anxieties, I must realize that, however paltry and incomprehensible it appears, each memory is nevertheless unique, in the most destitute sense of the word, and has occurred in my life linearly, in a singular way, in a singular exactitude, without the power of being modified and without the slightest deviation from its own precision.

"Your life was thus and not otherwise" says my memory, and in this pronouncement lies the immense nostalgia of the world, enclosed in its hermetic lights and colors from which no life is permitted to extract anything other than the aspect of an exact banality.

In it lies the melancholy of being unique and limited, in a unique and pathetically arid world.

Sometimes at night I wake from a terrible nightmare; it is my simplest and my most frightening dream.

I dream that I'm slumbering deeply in the bed where I went to sleep in the evening. The surroundings are the same and it's about the same time of night; if, for instance, the nightmare begins at midnight, it puts me in exactly the same kind of darkness and silence that reigns at that hour. I see and feel my position in the dream; I know in which bed and in which room I'm sleeping; my dream molds itself like a thin fine skin over my true position and over my true sleep at that instant. In this regard it could be said that I'm awake: I'm awake, but I sleep and dream my vigil. I dream my sleep of that moment.

And it's at this point that I suddenly feel the sleep deepening, becoming heavier and trying to pull me in deeper.

I want to wake up, but the sleep hangs heavily on my eyelids and my hands. I dream that I'm struggling, that I'm hitting out with my hands, but the sleep is stronger than me and after I have struggled for a moment, it holds me more firmly and more tenaciously. I then begin to cry out, I want to resist the sleep, I want someone to wake me, I slap myself violently to get up, I'm afraid the sleep will drown me too deeply and I will never be able to come back, I beg that someone help me, I cry out for someone to shake me...

Finally, my last cry, the loudest, wakes me. I suddenly find myself in my real room, which is identical to the room in my dream, in the position in which I was dreaming, at the hour when I suspected in my nightmare that I was struggling.

What I see around me now differs very little from what I saw just a second before, but there is some air of authenticity that hangs about things, about me, like the abrupt coolness of the atmosphere in winter, which suddenly amplifies all sonorities...

What does my sense of reality consist of?

The life that I will live until the next dream has returned around me. Present memories and pains weigh me down and I want to resist them, to not fall into their sleep, from which I may never return...

I struggle now in reality, I cry out, I beg to be waken, to be waken into another life, into my true life. It's certain that it's the middle of the day, that I know where I am and that I'm alive, but something is missing in all this, as in my awful nightmare.

I struggle, I cry out, I wrestle. Who will wake me?

Around me exact reality pulls me down still further, trying to drown me.

Who will wake me?

Always it was like this, always, always.

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